

All Saints' Sunday  
1 John 3:1-3  
The Rev. Joel W. Huffstetler  
5 November 2017

The first parish I served as an ordained minister was St. Andrew's in Canton, North Carolina. Some of you may know Canton. It's the mill town just this side of Asheville. I was there for four and a half years and was very happy there. I still have a wonderful regard for those people. They were very kind and encouraging to their very young pastor. One of the pillars of that church was a woman named Lillian Sherman. By the time I knew Lillian she was in her 80's. Her husband had been rector of St. Andrew's many years before and had predeceased her by many years. Lillian was the spiritual matriarch of that church. She didn't have any interest at that point in vestry, or any of the business angles of the church. But when it came to the spiritual life of the church there was no question that Lillian Sherman was the prayer warrior in that congregation.

Lillian was very kind to me. She used to have me up to lunch periodically. We'd have little, tiny portions of food, and I was grateful for every bite. She had a different sense of 'lunch' than I did at that stage.

We had a wonderful relationship. Lillian taught me many things. I think the most lasting lesson I learned was about graciousness. The crucifix that hangs in my office was Mr. Sherman's. It was gifted to me by Lillian and I see it every day. This prayer book was Lillian's, and it still has her return address label in it marking it as her's. And to this day, every single time I go into a hospital room to administer last rites I do so from this prayer book. It's a way of keeping me in touch with my lasting friendship with Lillian.

When Lillian came to die she was in St. Joseph's Hospital in Asheville. Lillian was in the Intensive Care Unit there and I was called on a Saturday evening. There was still light in the sky. I can remember what the room looked like, the light coming through the windows. I

can remember that evening as if it were last evening. When it came time for Lillian and I to say goodbye she extended her hand and took mine and this woman in her 80's, this saint, said to me: "Dear Joel, please continue to pray for me." I can remember it as if it were yesterday. And so I took that on board and was still holding her hand when I said, "Yes Lillian, I will continue to pray for you." And I thought that was the end of the conversation. So then Lillian, still grasping my hand said, "And dear Joel, I will continue to pray for you." That's a moment that I will cherish for the rest of my days. And in that moment my appreciation for the communion of saints was born. I would have acknowledged it intellectually up to that point. But after that moment the communion of saints was very real to me and has been ever since. The thought of Lillian Sherman praying for me in eternity - it's a lasting comfort, a lasting strength.

When we have a burial here if the celebration of the Eucharist is a part of the funeral the priest prays these words early in the Eucharistic Prayer: "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens." What the communion of saints teaches us is that our relationships with those who have gone from us physically continue on. The love that we share in this life continues. We still love those who have gone before us. And what the communion of saints teaches us is that they still love us. The relationship with a loved one continues, even when one has departed this physical life. This is why we pray for the departed in every liturgy that happens in this church. Every single time we worship we allow space to pray for the departed. And this again is a recognition of the reality of what we call the communion of saints. Relationships endure. Our love endures. And their love endures.

Every week in the Rite One liturgy when we pray for the departed we use these words: "Grant them continual growth in thy love and service." The danger in a liturgy that is

so familiar to us is that sometimes we may lose concentration on really hearing what's being said. Every week in the Rite One liturgy we pray: "Grant them continual growth in thy love and service."

So this is our theology: that though we pass from this life to the next our relationship with God continues. And so we pray for the departed in their new relationship with God, their deepening relationship with God, in addition to our continued relationship with them. Some of you have come into this church in recent years and would have no reason to know about my sister. I go years without mentioning her in the liturgy. I am the only surviving child in my family. I had a sister named Lee who died at the age of 38. We had the same parents, and grew up in the same household but could not possibly have been more different! A psychologist or sociologist could have a field day studying how two people could come from the same parents and live in the same household and come to see the world so radically differently. We saw everything differently, politics, economics, etc., and yet we loved each other. We were blood. And regardless of how differently we saw the world and how differently life had evolved for us that love endured.

We didn't talk that often, we really weren't very close. The phone would ring ever so often at 10:30 or 11:00 pm and she'd say: "Hey big brother, I just wrote a check that will bounce to the moon if someone who loves me doesn't send me a little money." So I'd say: "How much do you need?" This week I was driving on Keith Street towards town and there was a woman standing at the entrance to Tinsley Park and she looked just like my sister. An interesting moment.

Sometimes I have very vivid dreams of all different types. My dreams would make an interesting study. Occasionally I dream about our family. I had one recently. And when I dream about our family Lee is always in the dream. Always. She looks exactly like she did at

the end of her life. She's dressed the way she dressed. And she's just one of us. Every single time in the dream my sister is still part of the family. She's been gone for 14 years now.

I'm telling you this personal story to tell us all that our relationships endure. Our love endures. And when we pray for the departed, we are not acknowledging a past reality so much as we're praying for an ongoing relationship. And just like we pray for our loved ones, our theology is that in eternity they are praying for us. And that's the communion of saints. It's not some far out doctrine that needs tremendous intellectual wrestling. The communion of saints is a theology of relationship. "For to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended."

The communion of saints is what All Saints' Sunday is about. Your loved ones, and mine. Members of this church on whose shoulders we stand every single time we walk into this room.

The communion of saints. Relationships of enduring love, and a deep-felt hope for reunion is what All Saints' Sunday is about.

In a moment we're going to have a prayer as part of our liturgy that I'd like to share with you now.

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy. Amen.