

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 4, 2012, All Saints' and Stewardship Sunday, dedicated to the memory of the nine members who died this past year at First Church and to all our beloved and dearly departed extended family members, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“No More Tears”**

**Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17; Matthew 5:1-12**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today we celebrate All Saints' Day. All Saints Day is the closest we come to a family reunion in the church of Jesus Christ. If we look closely at our church family album, we will see our relatives, friends and saints of God stretching across thousands of miles and thousands of years. Although they are just beyond the thin veil that separates heaven and earth, they are close to us. If you look hard, you can see them. If you listen closely, you can hear their voices. Whether you call them beloved friends and family, a great cloud of witnesses or the angels of glory, they are here with us.

There are the familiar few with whom we walked this earth. Pictures of their smiles, their embrace, their laughter and their love are as close as our own thoughts and memories. Our lives and stories were entwined with theirs. We remember their successes and failures, their joys and their suffering. Their adorable and infuriating humanity filled us with admiration and love many times and at other times with fury and anguish. Although we may have had our lover's quarrels, it was love that carried us in and out of our times together.

Then there are the saints who have gone before us through the millennia but whose presence is also felt. We remember Saint James the Greater, brother of St. John whose revelation we received today. James was a man so full of grace and truth that on his way to his death, the guard assigned to him fell on his face and confessed faith in his prisoner's God. James raised him up by the hand, kissed his cheek and said, "*The peace of the Lord be with you.*" They were executed together, but their last sweet exchange lives on in the exchange we share each Sunday, "*The peace of the Lord be **always** with you.*"

Some of the names of the saints of God roll off our tongues: St. Francis, St. Alban, St. Patrick, St. Brendan, St. Teresa, St. Dominic, St. Charles, St. Benedict, St. Ignatius. Their names can be found on churches, hospitals, retreat centers, high schools and universities. Their gifts, their charisms have guided orders of religious men and women and generations of common Christians through the ages. Because we are Congregational, we add the names of those closer to us in time and space: St. Lyman Beecher, St. Frederick Douglass, St. Harriet Tubman, St. Martin Luther King, Jr., St. Fred Shuttlesworth, St. Sojourner Truth, St. Absalom Jones, and yes, St. Washington Gladden.

When you start meeting the saints, one of the things that become apparent is that they were not, shall we say, very saint-like at times. Saint Francis was said to roll around naked in the snow to protect himself from his lusty thoughts. Saint Christopher was on his way to dedicate his life to the devil when a mysterious hermit recruited him for God instead. Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for 17 years before she became a desert mother for the next 50 years. St. Dorothy Day, the Saint of Catholic Worker fame, was a chain-smoker who had her daughter out of wedlock. A young St. Thomas Merton also had a child out of marriage before converting to Christianity on the streets of New York and eventually he became a Trappist monk – living and writing mostly in solitude in Gethsemane, Kentucky.

Generally speaking the saints of God are not distinguished by their goodness. They are distinguished by their extravagant love of God which shines brighter than anything else about them (drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor in *Home By Another Way*, p. 209).

Frederick Buechner writes of the saints, *"In God's holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."* (*Ibid*, pp.209-210) Buechner seems to suggest that "saint-making" is more in the hands of God than in ours. That is true. However you name the saints, they really are ordinary men and women whose love for God led them to do extraordinary things. This means that no one in this room today can simply shrug his or her shoulders and say, *"Sainthood is beyond my reach."* The words from the Congregationalist hymn writer resonates with us today: *"The saints of God are just folks like me, God help me to be one, too."*

So what does "saint-making" take? To become a saint of God you must embrace God with love and receive God's embrace of love as well. To be a saint takes time, prayer, action on behalf of others and commitment to be generous. Perhaps most of all, the heart of a saint is a generous heart. The action of a saint on behalf of others is always generous.

For the past month, the theme of our stewardship campaign leading up to this day has been **"The Circle of Faithful Generosity."** Remember that "generosity" is defined as *"1) readiness or liberality in giving; 2) freedom from meanness or smallness of mind or character."* (*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*). To be generous in our living and giving is a calling from God. On this All Saints' Day, I invite you to step up in your generosity.

You can be like one of God's handkerchiefs - St. Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I have told her story before. But on this Sunday in which we consider saints and their generosity, her story is worth lifting up again.

St. Osceola was a laundress who dropped out of school at age 12 and gave herself over to a lifetime of washing clothes. She never married. She never had children. First, she took care of her auntie, then her grandmother and finally her mother through her backyard laundry business. For 75 years she scrubbed the dark clothes on her washboard and boiled the white colors in a black pot in her backyard. Her days started when the sun rose and stopped when it went down.

Until she was 87 no one really knew who she was. That was the year St. Osceola McCarty gathered together \$150,000 – her entire life savings – and went to the University of Southern Mississippi to establish scholarships for young black women to go to college. Osceola McCarty had children in her final years as she adopted all those who received her scholarships. When she was asked why she did not spend any of the money on herself, St. Osceola smiled, with the slyest of smiles and said, “*Oh, but I **am** spending it on myself.*”

Revelation 9:17 tells us that in the end of time, God will reach down with one of God’s handkerchiefs and wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more weeping, no more crying. Then, we will sing and dance together in a heavenly reunion with all the saints and all the souls in glory. While that is a beautiful image of a heavenly reunion, that time has not yet come. So, between this time and that time, let each one of us live fully into our calling to be more like the saints of God, more like those who seek to shine Christ’s light in this world of darkness.

Today, we lift up the souls of our dearly departed church family members. Their names were: Janice and Jason; Elizabeth and Ardis; Judy and Marion; Marilyn and Gwen and Laura. Their departure from our lives has left a hole in our collective soul. Beyond our First Church family, we have lost large as well in this past year. We have lost our parents, our siblings, our friends, our co-workers and our neighbors. And of course, there are those saints who have gone before us in the years before this one. All of them are on our minds and in our hearts today. In their honor, in

their memory, let us grow in our circle of generosity extending our arms of love to those close at hand and far beyond us.

Think of St. Osceola McCarty, with her sly smile. As you extend your generosity, you are (indeed) spending it on yourself. And in the spirit of St. James the Greater, “*May the peace of the Lord be always with you*” as you become ever more generous and compassionate in your walk of life and faith. Amen.

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