

“TO FOLLOW THY BLESSED SAINTS”

It is a wonderful Collect that is appointed for All Saints Day:

O almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys which thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Surely the saints inspire us to virtue, to godly living, to higher aspirations, to deeper commitment, to courage, to faithfulness. At the bottom of a long list of Old Testament saints in Hebrews chapter 11, the author draws a line as you would when adding a column of numbers and writes, “Therefore.” “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set for us” (12:1).

There are so many saints that could and do inspire us to run the race that is before us: St. Peter, St. Paul, St. John, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp, St. Augustine, St. Francis. The list is really endless. I want us to remember today, however, other saints who are not so famous, who are closer to home, and who are more like us. On this anniversary Sunday of Saint John’s I am thinking particularly of those who quite literally have gone before us, have gone with us, and to whom we are indebted beyond words. They too by their unflinching loyalty, commitment and personal sacrifice may be said to have gone through tribulation and to have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, for all who truly take up their cross to follow our Lord imitate his sacrifice, die to self and worldly gain, and partake of his resurrection.

To set the context I want to review briefly a history some of you know, but most only in part. I first heard of Saint John’s when Florence spotted a classified ad in *The Christian Century* telling of a unique church in south Florida, Presbyterian in background, seeking a new minister “with emphasis on scholarly preaching, traditional liturgy and pastoral care,” a wonderfully distinctive and all-too-rare combination of emphases. Fruitful correspondence and telephone conversations followed, and we were

scheduled for a sermon and interview the Sunday following Easter 1992. We drove by the church two weeks prior to that, however, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, having brought my son Joshua to visit his sister in Delray Beach during Holy Week. As we drove back to Orlando later that afternoon I told Florence that I wanted to gracefully bow out of the scheduled interview. I was not impressed with what I saw of Saint John's, in fact I honestly found it quite off-putting. The building and grounds had not been well maintained, there was a simple painted plywood sign out front., and I had decided very definitely that I did not want to pursue this option.

The next morning, Palm Sunday, we got to St. Luke's Cathedral about 20 minutes early and during prayerful preparation for the service the sarcastic but ironic comment that was made about our Lord in the Gospels came powerfully and irresistibly to my mind, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth was sort of a county-bumpkin kind of town; it was not impressive, and I understood the parallel immediately and knew from that moment that God wanted me to go to Saint John's. Now I am naturally skeptical when people say that God spoke to them and directed them to do this or that, as a few years ago the lady up the street from us said she heard God tell her to release her pet boa constrictor in the lake behind our house. But when, like the prophets, you feel compelled to do that which you do not want to do, and find it in accord with the general ways of the working of our Lord and the Holy Spirit, that is a different matter, and it is unsafe not to listen to that voice. And so, quite in contradiction to what I thought I wanted to do, we came here to do what in fact thirty-five years of study and ministry had prepared us to do.

The worship service of Saint John's was somewhat liturgical, but there was no sense of the great historic liturgy of the Church. The choir sang the 'Sanctus' each Sunday but altogether out of its proper context and apart from its intended purpose. It was sung, so I was told, in order to "wow" the congregation. The Holy Eucharist, which had to be celebrated each week according to the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, the denomination with which the church was then affiliated, was a brief 7 or 8 minute service held for a few people in the chapel *before* the worship service. The church desperately needed a new direction. Dr Sutphin with his spell-binding oratory was no longer there to hold them together. They needed a solid biblical, historical, theological and liturgical

base, and that is what in fact they had asked for. There seemed to be little real sense of the Church or even of church. The atmosphere was more like that of a club centered around a charismatic personality. I do not fault them. They really did not know better. They had little experience of real churchmanship and little knowledge of Church principles. They had operated as an independent body, doing what seemed best with no sense of the larger and crucial issues that have to do with being truly a church and a part of *the* Church. Furthermore, there had been a 2½ year interim between Dr. Sutphin's death and my arrival.

And so it was not really surprising that resistance to movement in a true churchly direction was immediate and intense, part of the dynamics of following the long tenure of an inspiring personality. (When Russell Baker was asked to host Masterpiece Theater, he said he did not want to follow Alastair Cooke, who hosted it with such distinction for so many years. He wanted to follow the man who followed Alastair Cooke!) Things quickly came to a head and a congregational meeting held in March nine months after I arrived revealed deep divisions and strong feelings. (This is sounding a little familiar, I know, but the context was quite different.) I began to get anonymous letters addressing me as Dr. Kevorkian (I was killing the church!). There were written threats to put my entire library, which is quite valuable and indispensable to me, the careful collection of a lifetime, out in the back parking lot [Florence remembers it as being in Federal Highway]. There are no fights like church fights, and all the more heinous because they are in such utter contradiction to fundamental Christian principles.

A congregational meeting called in late summer of '93 by some leaders of the opposition, met without my presence (I deliberately opted not to attend), and voted to close the church, in order that they could reorganize, sans yours truly. That meeting, however, was not valid because, according to the Constitution carefully written by Dr. Sutphin, only the minister could call and moderate a congregational meeting. When that was pointed out a majority of the congregation left immediately and monies in the bank rightly belonging to the church and necessary for its maintenance and survival were legally, or rather illegally, blocked. Everyone was sure the church would be closed within a month. The organ builder called every week or so hoping he could pick up our organ for a song and install it elsewhere.

That was the tribulation and while it did not involve the shedding of blood it was severe enough. The remnant that remained was a precious few. There was a \$100,000 mortgage on the building. Florence and I and Joshua had just moved lock, stock and barrel from Orlando, my career was at stake and the whole future of this church, but, in the providence of God it was *the very best thing* that could have happened to us, for those who remained were deeply committed to what we were doing, to the integrity of the worship and the faith of the church. There was a profound unity of spirit and a great joy in watching God provide for his own week by week, as he did in ways beyond number and beyond our understanding. I look back now on that time as a time of great blessing, and I bring it up today in part because God commands us to remember his great blessings with praise and thanksgiving, as we do quite deliberately on this anniversary day, and in part because I think that those saints who put their shoulders to the task a decade and a half ago may be an inspiration to us today.

Those of us who were left were a precious few, as I said,--both few and precious--but with a rare commitment to the gospel and to the integrity of Christian worship. That commitment was shared by all, but it was given memorable expression most clearly by Juanita Friedrichs who had a fine way with words and who put them down at various points along the way. At the time of that first congregational meeting when the depth of the rift first began to become obvious she wrote:

March 8, 1993

To the members of St. John's Christian Church:

We have been attending St. John's regularly since shortly before Christmas. We are members of a Lutheran church in Connecticut, where we spend several months each year.

Thus, we speak here as visitors and outsiders, Perhaps, to some degree, we represent the reactions of other outsiders who will discover St. John's as we did, and who will contribute to a growth in your membership.

After twenty years of searching in this area of Florida, we have at last found a church with the spiritual depth we have been looking for. St. John's is truly outstanding, not only in south Florida, but in the broader context. We lived for many years in New York City and had the opportunity to attend churches of various denominations there. No services anywhere, however grand in scale, have moved us more than those at St. John's.

We cannot begin to tell you the joy and blessing we have received here. The fine sermons, music, and liturgy all contribute. The congregation has been friendly and welcoming. . . .

Church attendance should not be contingent upon style of worship or preaching, but rather upon the call to follow Christ. But it is also true that we all need spiritual food. Christians cannot go out into the world and do the hard and often mundane tasks of discipleship on a starvation diet. We believe God uses fine preaching, beautiful music and liturgy to give us the inspiration and strength we need to further His kingdom.

May we try to express to you what good liturgy has come to mean to us?

Your services draw on the best of centuries of Christian tradition in worship. These forms, while they may not be familiar to some, are not out-dated. They are timeless, because they express our deepest human needs and God's incredible response to those needs. Liturgy, through its beauty and dignity, can lift us above ourselves and the ordinariness of much in our lives, and draw us into the extra-ordinary mystery of God's holiness and love.

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So many churches have sacrificed a sense of the awesomeness of God's presence in an attempt to be contemporary, informal, "relevant." . . .

Please, dear friends, before you discard the traditional, liturgical forms of worship which have inspired so many generations of Christians, give them a chance! Approach the liturgy with a serene and open mind; learn about it; give it time to speak to your hearts. Then make your decisions.

You have so much going for you right now at St. John's.

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Two months later she wrote this piece:

Some secrets were never meant to be kept.

Drive along Federal Highway in Pompano Beach. Motels, pawn shops, pizza parlors, banks, car dealers, purveyors of furniture, real estate, entertainment, sex. This is America—ever dissatisfied, always restless, always searching for more, bigger, newer.

Amid the signs and billboards competing for attention, there is something you may not have noticed. It is quiet and unpretentious. No gimmicks, no lures, no assault on your consciousness. You might even say it has a lonely look.

You could drive by this small white-steepled building a thousand times. . .

But suppose you stopped. Suppose you went inside at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, as we did a few months ago.

You have just stepped into another world. The small sanctuary has the simplicity and serenity of a New England village church. White

predominates. White, the color of Easter, of holiness and wholeness, the color that embraces and transforms every color of the spectrum. There is something about white in a church. . .

Then, the music. Oh, what music! How can so small a choir make such sublime sounds?

And the Word, proclaimed with power and with humility. The word of welcome, too, spoken in friendship.

You will not hear modern slang or contemporary “hip” music in this church. No guitars, no drums. Call it out-of-date. Or call it timeless.

The service is a liturgy of prayer and worship drawn from many Christian traditions, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant. In some mysterious way, the cadences of words and music weave together a language that speaks joyfully, irresistibly to the soul.

Something important is happening in this little church! There has been planted the seed of commitment, not to any one particular denomination, but to the unity and mission of the whole Church. The agenda is simple but not easy: to do the will of God...to express the love of God.

It is hard not to be passionate about this church, a courageous group of people, in the midst of hardship and struggle, working toward a true sense of community. How rare a goal in our fragmented, fractious world! Forget competition, personalities, obsession with individual rights. Instead, think humility, forbearance, service to others. Try to imagine how our world would be if we truly bore one another’s burdens. That’s what this church is about.

St. John’s is at 4213 North Federal Highway in Pompano. Some secrets are meant to be shared.

Finally, in January of 1994, as we were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the church, she penned this:

This is our love-letter to St. John’s—not so much for its past history, in which we have no involvement, but for what it is now, and for what it will become. As some of you know, I get very emotional about this church.

Arthur and I started coming to St. John’s in December, just over a year ago. We came for the beauty of the liturgy and the music, and for the eloquence and seriousness of the preaching. For many years, we had missed the highly liturgical worship we had grown to love as members of a Lutheran church in New York City. When we found St. John’s, it was like a long-deferred home-coming, full of joy. As if that weren’t enough, we stumbled upon a double portion of riches—the best of all the great Christian traditions. There is so much here to feed the soul.

But there’s more to this church even than fine liturgy and music and preaching, wonderful and inspiring as those are. As time went on, and we kept coming to St. John’s, the hardships and trials you faced became

apparent to us, we saw the unquenchable spirit, the faith, and the dogged determination that make this church a very special place. Your pastor, your music director and choir, and you the members have given us an example of what it means to be faithful

Week after week, we see you, such a small band, carrying out the tasks that help St. John's become a blessing to all who worship here. We see you seeking not to glorify yourselves, but to bring glory to God. We see enthusiasm, in the deepest meaning of that word: God working in you through you.

There's a sense of peace in this church—that mind-boggling peace of God, so far past our understanding, which can envelop us even in the midst of struggle.

There's a feeling of safety here, too. Safety from the compromises too many churches make when they try to be all things to all men, and end up meeting people's superficial needs without ever addressing their deeper spiritual longings. Safety, too, for the Word of God—a place where that Word is not infiltrated by the word of men, but is simply proclaimed and heard and nurtured in our hearts.

This church has weathered a lot of storms in the past three or four years. Perhaps where is calm ahead.

But wait a minute! I think I hear the rafters shaking. Do you hear it? And just when we thought we were safe and sound. That's what happens when we let the pure and holy Word of God invade a church. It's a risky business, following Christ. He will take us outside of our beautiful, safe little world and ask us to serve in ways we might not choose for ourselves. That's the call of His kingdom, the demand of His Holiness—overpowering...exhilarating...and uphill all the way.

What a wonderful direction to be going!

There's an old children's book called "The Little Engine That Could." I like to think of St. John's as the little church that could—and can—and will. But there's a great big difference between that little engine and this little church. The little engine had to rely on its own steam. St. John's has a far greater Source of power. That's our real cause for confidence and for rejoicing.

She, being dead, yet speaketh!

Juanita and Arthur were only two of the saints of which I think when I reflect upon and give thanks to God, each one of whom, congregation and staff (as Juanita pointed out), sacrificed greatly, each in his own way, giving of themselves above and beyond the call of duty, and to them all we owe the greatest debt. We are here today only because of their commitment and sacrifice. The difficulties that we face now, while

greater than we think we can manage, are not nearly as great as they were then. We now have a debt-free building, a beautifully renovated church and some limited resources in the bank. More importantly we have that legacy of spirit and commitment to the worthy worship of God, to the integrity of the liturgy, the seriousness of the preached word, and the fulsomeness of hymnody for which they gave themselves. That is a legacy on which we dare not turn our backs, and which it is now our responsibility to pass on to another generation. It was because of a commitment to these things and a refusal to compromise that we did not cease to be 15 years ago. It is commitment that breeds commitment. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. It is the way of the cross that leads to the resurrection. It is that cloud of witnesses that has gone before, that white-robed army, that inspires us to lay aside every weight, to put off every encumbrance, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Early Friday afternoon in Richmond I sat in an airplane still at the gate long after departure time. The pilot was aware that many of us, including me, had very limited time to make our connections in Atlanta, but rainy weather there had slowed things down and hence everything was backed up. When we finally got underway the pilot explained and apologized for the delay, and then he said, “We’re gonna to fly this thing like we stole it!” What a marvelous way to put it! True to his word, even after he landed he taxied to the gate more quickly than I have ever seen it done, and after almost running the entire length of the concourse I arrived at the gate for the final leg of my trip just as the last people in line were boarding. Without his flying the plane “like he stole it,” I wouldn’t have made it.

St. Paul would have loved that expression. He talked about always running the race as though to win it, about fighting for victory not flaying the air, but this is even more apt. (We are, of course, applauding the effort not the ethics.) Those who have stolen a car have but one thing on their mind and they are not going to let anything distract them. They are focused. They are committed. They have a singular purpose. If they don’t achieve it, everything has been in vain. The saints are like that, the saints of old, the saints of which we have been speaking this morning, . . . and the saints which

you are. I don't know about you, but I believe there are good and even better things to come out of this Nazareth.

Let us pray,

O almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord; Grant us grace so to follow thy blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those unspeakable joys which thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on All Saints Day, November 1, 2009. Copyright © 2009.