

Keeping Austin Heights Weird

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25; Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 3) 2024

All Saints Sunday

Kyle Childress

Today is All Saints Sunday in churches around the world. It is the church's "memorial day" when we remember those who have passed away or gone before us. It's a day to be encouraged by remembering and giving thanks to God for those who continue to serve as examples to us about how to be a disciple of Jesus. And it is a day when we also tell stories about other "saints" of our faith who are alive today.

According to the New Testament, every disciple of Jesus Christ was called a saint, literally, a "holy one," someone set apart for service to God. To be a Christian means to be set apart and called to serve, to minister. That is why we are reminded from time to time that every member is a minister. And that is also why we can say that every Christian is a saint.

From the time of the New Testament, indeed even back to the oldest Old Testament days, God's people looked for concrete models on how to be faithful to God. Biblical practice has always been to see God's work through specific, local and "in-the-flesh" people. So, if the community of faith is struggling with how to follow Jesus, they looked at how other communities of faith have done it. To be encouraged Christians have looked at the model of other Christians who have been courageous. In order to see what love looks like Christians look at the lives of others who have been extraordinarily loving.

Nowadays, in this part of the world it is doubly important for us to celebrate those saints who have gone before us. From our founding in April 1968, we have been a church that dissented from the status quo. We swim against the cultural and religious stream, and we always have.

But it is essential for us to know that we do not go against the grain or swim against the stream because we are contrarians – although we might be that. **We swim *against* the stream of our culture because we seek to swim *with* the current of the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Jesus incarnated God's Way of grace and mercy, love and forgiveness, justice and peace. He reconciled enemies, forgave the unforgivable, loved the unlovable, touched the untouchable, and included the outcasts. His followers are to do the same.

But to incarnate and practice Jesus' Way is hard. It's unpopular. It's peculiar. Using today's language, it's weird. So we remember the saints, those who were Jesus-loving misfits, malcontents, and maladjusted. These oddball heroes of the faith keep us oriented in the right direction and they encourage us to stick to it and not give up.

We followers of Jesus embrace the identity of those chosen by God in times gone by. In the Old Testament, Israel was called by God "to be a peculiar people unto himself" (Deut. 14:2) as the old King James puts it.

A few years ago, there was a public relations campaign in Austin that said, "keeping Austin weird." Well, today we are reminded that we are keeping Austin Heights weird by being the peculiar people following Jesus.

In Exodus Moses says, "Now, therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed,

and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for the earth is mine” (19:5 KJV).

The New Testament echoes this call of God in I Peter 2:9, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (KJV).

We are to take care to remember that the weirdness, the peculiarity of being Christian is not a quality in which we can boast. God did not call us because we’re cool or smarter or more committed or because of any virtue of our own. We’re called because God is the God of grace. And we are called to show forth praise of God who called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

Deuteronomy 6 that we read a few minutes ago, says that when our children come to us and ask why we live such peculiar lives, why do we live this odd way, that we are to tell them the stories of our faith and the stories of those who have gone before us.

When our children come then let us teach them the story of peculiar people, saints of the faith, like the five families who founded Austin Heights in 1968 because they were fed up with segregated churches who would not let you ask questions and talk about hard issues. We tell our children stories about my mentor Will Campbell, radical Baptist who was a reconciler between black and white, and we tell about Dietrich Bonhoeffer who resisted Hitler and spoke out for the Jews when no one else did.

And we tell them the stories of Fannie Lou Hamer, a poor black sharecropper’s wife who led the way – at extraordinary risk – for voting rights in

Mississippi, and Dorothy Day, who at great sacrifice fed and housed homeless people in what became known as Catholic Worker Houses. We tell of Julian of Norwich, who wrote the first English language book by a woman, and who said in 1390, “And so Jesus is our true Mother in nature by our first creation. And he is our true Mother in grace by taking our created nature... He is our Mother, brother, savior” (in Diana Butler Bass, *A People’s History of Christianity*, p. 109).

Or we tell of saints who are our contemporaries, examples we can look to and learn from, like John Garland, the pastor of San Antonio Mennonite Church, whom Jane knew in Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, KY. John’s father, David, taught me New Testament at Southern Seminary, and his mother, Diana was dean of the social work school there. After a baptism preparation class at church, 9-year-old John said, “Baptism means following Jesus even to the cross... I don’t think I’m ready for that.” But eventually, he did take up the way of the cross in baptism and later moved with his parents to Baylor where both of them taught and led, his father became dean of Truett Seminary, and his late mother became dean of what is now known as the Garland School of Social Work.

John went to Truett Seminary at Baylor and was a classmate and friend of our own Sarah Carbajal. While a student he worked with homeless people and lived and worked on the World Hunger Farm, which we took our youth to visit years ago. Eventually, John became pastor and with his Anabaptist church in San Antonio, he says, “Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our lives, and reconciliation is the center of our work.” John has led his congregation to be a leading church, perhaps *the* leading church in Texas in ministry with migrants. John says he doesn’t use the word “immigrant” but prefers instead, “pilgrim.”

John says, *“Seven years ago, there’s a woman who was catching a bus from the Greyhound station, which is about a mile from our church. And she saw a young woman sitting on the floor with her baby, and the young woman looked like she was central American. The woman went over to offer help. And she’s like, ‘Is there anything I can do to help you? You look like you need some ...’ And the woman cowered and turned away and said, ‘I don’t need any help.’”*

John continued, *“It was really haunting the woman, as she was waiting for her bus. And before she got on, she went over again. She tried again, she sat down on the floor next to this young mother, and she said in her best Spanish, ‘I’m from a church. Is there anything I can do to help you?’” And the woman breaks into tears and says, ‘I have no idea where I am, and I have nothing. And I’ve been begging God to send somebody.’” And the woman then doesn’t know what to do. She calls her pastor, a friend of ours, and the pastor then calls the city and calls other people because they realize it’s not just this woman. It is dozens of mothers like this every day, who are all of a sudden being found in the downtown bus station with no one to help them.”*

John said, *“This was not a city problem. It was not a law enforcement problem. It was not a county problem. These are not citizens. And we realized as a church and a group of churches that this was our ... We needed to respond.”*

Our fellow saints like John Garland ask us, how do we need to respond?
What does Jesus call us to do?

Theologian Christopher Rowland said that the Church’s saints are men and women who “refuse to remain spectators of the panorama of injustice” and who expect to be “victims in conflicts with those who have the most to lose in the removal of injustice” (Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 161).

In other words, living in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus requires a little madness – at least madness defined by those with Power. And it is going to cost us something as we refuse to remain spectators and instead, we take up the Way of the Cross of Jesus.

Diana Butler Bass concludes in her book *A People's History of Christianity*, “It is the undertow of those quiet souls... who have made the world a better place... They testify, pray, offer hospitality, feed hungry people, and visit prisoners. They challenge the church, they preach peace, and they call for justice... For their trouble they often have been branded dissenters, heretics, infidels, and witches. Occasionally, the church gets it right and makes them saints” (p. 309).

So let us remember the peculiar people who followed Jesus and let us reclaim the courage to be peculiar ourselves. Let us follow Jesus, who was considered weird by the Powers of Domination and let us keep Austin Heights weird in the same way.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.