

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

November 7, 2021

*Saints and Sinners*

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*Let us pray . . .*

Last Tuesday evening, as the Aer Lingus flight I was on touched down at New York's JFK airport from the United Kingdom — most of the plane broke into joyful applause. As the jubilation died down, I sat there in seat 43K trying to recall the last time I broke into joyful applause and I couldn't remember.

My thoughts drifted to the passing of another All Saint's Day. I read that the remembrance of All Saints day comes from the belief that there is a spiritual bond between those who've died and those of us still here. Of course my unplanned trip to Wales had stirred up everything around life and connections and loss and moving forward . . . meaning, it stirred up all kinds of spiritual bonds.

And as the plane taxied to the gate, I looked around at each person, wondering about his story and her story. That one's regrets and that one's sorrows. Her deep joys and his accomplishments. And all the places in between. I thought of my own colorful and dull life story — full of my own regrets and sorrows. My own deep joys and accomplishments and all the places in between. I thought about how we are all bonded by our shared humanity and imperfections. We're all saints and we're all sinners.

The point of the letter to the Hebrews was to show God's understanding for this imperfection of ours by pressing upon the early believers the perfection and supremacy of Jesus Christ in all matters.

The Letter to the Hebrews was primarily written to Jewish believers undergoing persecution for their belief in Jesus. So, the letter served as a source of guidance and warning. With their lives so hellish, these early followers understandably wanted to retreat to their old, established and familiar religion, Judaism.

We all likely know there's nothing like turning to the comfort of what is familiar in times of distress, chaos or even horror. However, the writer of Hebrews states, unequivocally, that there is no turning back. The 1,400 year old system of law, sin, priest, temple, blood sacrifice, is surpassed and transcended by and through the perfect life, death, resurrection, and advocacy of Christ.

So if we consider the intersection of All Saints Day and this letter to the Hebrews, then I think this lesson offers a great opportunity to as the hosts at Pulpit Fiction say, to engage with the basic question Hebrews is trying to answer - and that is, how is Jesus Savior?

Hebrews answers by laying it out that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice once and for all time- with no need to offer another atoning sacrifice — you only need to hear and believe the good news in what Jesus has done.

But what if — like me — you don't lean into sacrificial atonement? Then how is Jesus Savior? Theologian Fred Craddock shares this intriguing reflection on our lesson from Hebrews:

“We have the occasion to observe that ‘blood’ is in the ancient texts the equivalent of ‘life’ and that the writer of Hebrews at times makes the exchange so that Christ's sacrifice is the offering of himself, presenting to God his life.... This is to say, Christ's offering of his life

to God was the ultimate act of worship in order that we, with purified consciences, may 'worship the living God.'

Now, listen carefully to this final beautiful statement — where I fully align with Craddick: What then, is this worship if it is not the offering of ourselves to God in ways appropriate to the nature of God and the needs that present themselves to us?."

Beloveds, I don't doubt that most of us must — as believers — hope or trust that there is something more into which we will return or move on to after our lives here have ended. And we also hope that somehow the wrongs we have done will be made right. Without these hopes, I'm not sure where our interest and grounding in Christianity or spirituality would be anchored.

I certainly have my faith and hope in these claims despite being perpetually baffled by the Christ event in the story of Jesus . . . and yet it's that very event that gives Christianity a way to talk about the

spiritual bond between God and each of us. It's *that bond* that God works through to help us stay connected with the Divine. It's *that bond* that Jesus taught and lived into to also help us stay connected with the Divine.

And as people of faith, our work is to wrestle with and nurture *that bond* in order to help keep us turned toward the things of God, no matter what we've done. And so while we're here, it is that bond that helps us make some of our wrongs right and it is that bond that we must reflect upon and tend to, because it is that bond that saves us.

That's why the "once for all" language from Hebrews is a critical and merciful teaching because the truth is, we are all saints and we are all sinners — with the reality being that most of us are a little bit of both and an awful lot of in between.

Jesus' teachings and life were to show us that "once for all" means that we don't have to keep performing for God's good graces. We

were born into God's good graces. We can mess up and we will still be irrevocably loved. I think that when we understand and internalize that truth, then that realization is also what saves us because it is the realization of the merciful and loving bond for all that supports and inspires us to try to do the next right thing.

Beloveds, worship shouldn't be something we do 1X week and then go about our lives. As best as we can — and some of you are really good at this — we must live our lives as an on-going expression of worship, reflecting and responding to our spiritual bond with God. Then it's possible that the world would be full of applause all the time as we each realize how a life in God, a life in the things that are of the utmost and the highest, is available to anyone — It's knowing that God carries all of us through life just like a big old jet air liner — getting us from one side of life to the other, no matter how smooth or turbulent things may be across the journey.

*Pause*

In seat 43K I thought about the things that keep me separated from my life with God or the Divine. I took my inventory and I'm working on it as part of my ongoing life's work. And because of the Divine's nature, I have — we each have — God's mercy which can also be thought of as understanding and we each have God's grace which can also be thought of as encouragement to help keep us in our shared spiritual bonds.

So what about you?

As we begin a new week, my hope is that you take time to reflect on the things that keep you from nurturing your spiritual bond with God and my prayer is that you joyfully receive God's mercy and grace — a once for all act that has the power to transform and consequently save any and all willing hearts.

Amen.