

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today's readings are certainly familiar to those who have attended Episcopal funerals or memorial services. Each of today's passages is among those listed as appropriate for reading within the burial rite, a service designed to celebrate the life of someone who has passed into God's heavenly realm. It's the theme of these lessons that ties them together—resurrection, the New Jerusalem, freedom from suffering and pain, a place where those who believe in our Lord Christ are rewarded with life everlasting and the abundance of good things. These lessons are at the center of the Good News Jesus came to earth to proclaim, handed down to comfort and assure us when we need to be reminded of God's promises, which surely happens when a loved one dies.

Today's Gospel tells us the honest story of a family's faith in God and their relationship with Jesus, the living Christ. Their struggles to understand how God is working in their lives are very obvious. The first thing we hear today is blame, in Mary's reaction to the death of her beloved brother. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." How easy it is to put the responsibility on someone else! Mary's words and actions come from her feelings. And then there's Martha, bless her heart. Martha's the practical one. Don't open that tomb! It's going to smell to high heaven. Martha loves Jesus and she follows him faithfully despite her doubts, but she values order in her life and she's not quite ready to relinquish her own control of things so that she can fully embrace the possibilities—and the joy—that come from trusting in our Lord's power.

We know this family from other stories in scripture that bear out their very human characteristics. We remember the costly oil that Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet, and how she liked to sit and listen to him teach, regardless of what was going on around her. And we remember that Martha had a hard time sitting still when there was work to be done, regardless of what her Lord was saying. In all that we know about these women, we can see ourselves and our own reaction. Because of that, we have empathy for their emotions at the death of their brother. We understand what that feels like!

Every time we have a memorial service at St. Francis, we're reminded that when a person of faith dies, our proper response is to celebrate, which, of course, is much easier said than done. It is much more comfortable to celebrate the lives and sainthood of people we never knew, as we're called to do today. That doesn't mean that we're throwing out our belief in life everlasting, but the celebration of All Saints' Day is an opportunity for us to consider that what we do in and with our earthly lives is our response to the blessings we receive from God in our belief.

We profess to believe in God's grace and mercy, although we may not truly understand what that means until our death. What are we to do with ourselves and our lives in the meantime? Our lack of understanding doesn't mean we should just sit waiting, drumming our fingers and killing time—no pun intended—until we understand or die, whichever comes first. The doctrine of grace tells us that belief in our Lord Christ is all that is necessary to enter into God's greater glory, but if we sit and wait to find out, we are surely missing the boat. All we are, all we have is a gift from God—including God's grace—but if we wait until we die to open the package that contains it we surely will not receive the full benefit of it.

The people we revere as saints didn't wait until the end of their lives to receive God's grace, and it's because of their example that this day has been set aside to remember them. Yes, they have died, but unless they were remarkably heroic or martyred, it is not their deaths we remember. More often, it's their lives that make them memorable. We don't call people saints because they died, but because of the ways their lives impacted our own, the lessons they taught us, the legacies they left

for our benefit, all of which were the results of the choices they made in their lives, choices that were both big and small. Those same choices are available to us.

More Than Words, that wonderful book published back in 1958 for “Church School Teachers and for Students in Junior High School Classes,” includes an essay on saints that begins with some good “saintly” information for all of us: “A saint is a person who had let God make him holy. God wants you to be a saint, not just a fairly decent Christian. You wouldn’t eat a “pretty good” egg. You wouldn’t fly with a “fair to middling” pilot. Neither does God want you to be second-rate. God will take you—over and over again—the way you are. But God will never stop wanting you to be one hundred percent holy and helping you to be a saint.”

There’s a story about a group of salesmen who had attended a convention together and had promised their wives they would be home for dinner on Friday night. At the airport they hurried to catch their plane, and one of them inadvertently knocked over a table which held a display of apples, sending the apples rolling in every direction. Without stopping or looking back, they all managed to reach their gate in time to board—all but one of them. This one paused, took a deep breath, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had been overturned. He waved goodbye to his buddies and returned to the terminal where the apples were scattered all over the floor.

He was glad he went back. He discovered the girl at the apple stand was totally blind. She was crying softly, tears running down her cheeks as she helpless groped for her spilled apples. All the while, crowds of people hurried by her, no one stopping to help her. The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that quite a few of them had been bruised and these he set aside. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, “Here, please take this forty dollars for the damage we did. Are you okay?” As she nodded, he continued, “I hope we didn’t spoil your day too badly.”

As he turned to walk away, the girl called out to him, “Mister...” He paused and turned back as she said, “Are you Jesus?” He stopped in mid-stride, and he wondered a moment before he went back and gently said to her, “No, I am nothing like Jesus. Jesus is good, kind, caring, loving, and would never have bumped into your display in the first place.” “I only asked because I prayed for Jesus to help me gather the apples,” the girl said. “He sent you to help me, so you are like him. Only he knows who will do his will. Thank you for hearing his call.” An ordinary man who let God make him holy through a simple, spontaneous choice.

In the week since we were last together, I’ve observed the acts of saints every single day, many of them here at St. Francis. These acts were done by people who never for a moment considered themselves to be saints; if anything, they saw themselves as servants. They were caregivers, sympathetic friends, hardworking employees, selfless volunteers. Their acts were as different as they are, but there was one unifying similarity: they were all Christians, every one of them living as Christ taught as to live, loving God and loving neighbors.

I sing a song of the saints of God, patient, and brave and true.
They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus’ will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,

Thank you, Lord, for the servants and saints you have placed among us. Help us to remember that your saints are folks just like us. Help us, please, to follow, their example, so that we, too, may be saints and servants. *Amen.*