

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day, the day we remember those who have gone before us into glory, as it were. We acknowledge the cloud of witnesses that both surrounds us and waits for us. Today we “*remember before God all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no man can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom we for evermore are one.*”

I’m talking about your grandfather and your infant daughter and your dear friend who has just succumbed to liver cancer. I’m talking about the soldier who took a bullet to the chest in the Battle of Dunkirk. I’m talking about the addict, once a mother’s precious bundle, whose final needle was fatally infected. I’m talking about the fireman who went up the Trade Center stairs into the fire, out of duty and out of love. I’m talking about the people of Christ Church who have died in the past year, the people Dave will name before God later in the service, as we commend them to the mercy of God.

I’m also talking about you. I’m talking about the inevitable hour of your own end, known to no man and yet ever present before the knowing eyes of God. And I’m talking about me. I’m talking about the day when some other minister will stand in this or some other pulpit and pronounce God’s benediction on my expired life: “May he rest in peace.”

This All Saints’ Day we remember those who have entered into salvation. It is tempting to think that those that have gone before us have achieved salvation, while we here continue on our journey. It is tempting to think that now salvation belongs to those who have gone to the grave and found that it was, in fact, nothing more than a gate. We may think those things all we want, but we would be wrong when we think them. Salvation, as we read in the Revelation to St. John, does not belong to them. Nor does it belong to us. “Salvation belongs to God. “

“*Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!*” This is what the great multitude that no one could count, people from every tribe and nation cry out as one loud voice. Salvation belongs to God alone, even then, even there, even for those that have already been saved.

Salvation belongs to God. If salvation belongs to God, what belongs to us? Well, for all of us on this present shore and in this lesser light, what belongs to us is sin. Sin would be the opposite of salvation; it would be what we need to be saved from. I don’t mean that there is nothing good in us or that we aren’t capable of beauty and bravery and kindness. I just mean that we are all born with a drive to be the center of our own lives. That’s what sin is.

And by sin I don't mean a little premarital dalliance here and some unethical business practice there. By sin I mean a condition. By sin I mean the assumption of control. I mean the presumption that our lives, our futures, our very selves belong not to God, but to us.

Sin is a condition, not behavior. Behavior is just the evidence of the condition. I heard it graphically described this way. Wrong behavior is the nosebleed, but the condition of sin is a brain hemorrhage. So often we try to treat the nosebleed as if it were the problem. The real problem, according to the Bible, is the brain hemorrhage.

Stanley Fish, the 74 year old literary theorist wrote a column in the New York Times this past week, reflecting on what he has learned in his life. Although he doesn't talk about sin, per se, he does address the underlying factors of behavior.

*“People are often in pain; their lives are shadowed by memories and anticipations of inadequacy, and they are always afraid that the next moment will bring disaster or exposure. You can see it in their faces, and that is especially true of children who have not yet learned how to pretend that everything is all right. The people who are most in pain are the people who act most badly; the worse people behave, the more they are in pain. They're asking for help, although the form of the request is such that they are likely never to get it.”*

Acting badly is just the nosebleed. Our behavior is just an expression of our condition. Sin makes us “me centric.” Someone nicknamed the prima donna Redskin cornerback DeAngelo Hall, “MeAngelo Hall” for a reason. Remember, “I” is in the middle of sin. Here's Shakespeare's Sonnet 62 on the subject:

*Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,/ And all my soul, and all my every part;  
And for this sin there is no remedy, /It is so grounded inward in my heart.*

This usually plays out in our presumption of control and autonomy. I belong to me. You belong to me. The world belongs to me. We believe that the world belongs to us so we can use it for our own gain. We believe that others belong to us so we can use them for our own purposes. We believe that we belong to us so we can do what we like.

Since I'm being graphic, here's one more image. Sin is men and boys not putting the toilet seat back down! Or even worse - not lifting it up beforehand! That image can be used literally or metaphorically. I'll do what I want and let others deal with the consequences. “I” is in the middle of sin.

I've just described the negative effects of sin. But there is another whole realm of sin. In fact, I think we are led astray when we think of sin only in terms of sex, drugs and rock and roll. That's just a bloody nose. Not good, mind you, but there are much worse things than a bloody nose.

We can use the life we think belongs to us for good. We can strive to be the best we can be and bring good to the world. We can even design an iPad. In the end, though, it doesn't matter. "I" is still in the middle of sin. We have still put ourselves in God's place, believing that our life and even our death belong to us. As Steve Jobs sister said about her brother's end, "*death didn't happen to Steve, he achieved it.*"

Although that comment may be the nadir of sin, please don't make the mistake of thinking you and I are much different. Which of us doesn't believe in our own achievement and who here doesn't at least want to be in control? The point is that all our brains are hemorrhaging control and self-centeredness, ever since Adam and Eve tried to seize control from God in the Garden.

So what belongs to us? The song we sing here called *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* says it this way: "false and full of sin I am, thou are full of truth and grace." We need God to come in and take back what rightfully belongs to him.

I just heard an arresting story of Jesus coming back to reclaim what is His own. I met a man who told me of his striving to do good for the world. He and his wife were vegans, visualizers of world peace, ardent workers in the vineyard of wellness for themselves, for others, for the earth and all it's creatures. All good things, you might say.

A few years ago, they went to a Yoga Retreat together, wanting to delve more deeply into the *Namaste* – the inner wellness that connects you with the universal spirit that animates all things. During one of the sessions, the instructor told the class to visualize their guru, any guru would do, any guru that could lead them deeper into *Namaste*. Now, my friend and his wife had only scant connection with the church. Maybe Christmas and Easter at the most. When the instructor asked them to visualize a guru, to his surprise and embarrassment, guess who showed up? Jesus.

After the session, he and his wife talked. He was not going to tell her what had happened – it was just too, well, tacky. Then, his wife sheepishly admitted that Jesus had appeared to her to at exactly the same time in exactly the same way. He was just there, with them. He didn't say anything or do anything. He just came up and stayed right beside them. My friend said his first reaction to Jesus was "What are You doing here? You don't belong here."

Of course, that is right where Jesus belongs – right in the middle of sin, whether for good or for ill, whether acting badly or acting goodly. Though sinless Himself, he became sin. If I am in the middle of sin, that's right where He shows up. And yes, we bled all over him. But, in return, He bled all over us. And according to today's reading, it is that very blood that makes us white, that makes us clean, that gives us salvation.

Sin belongs to us. Jesus took it from us. Salvation belongs to God. By his blood, Jesus gave it to us. In His death, He achieved our salvation. In the moment before he died, Steve Jobs was reported to have uttered as his final words, "*Oh wow... Oh wow... Oh wow.*" Just maybe, he caught a glimpse of the great multitude, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands, praising the Lamb on His throne.

Would that He, and all of us to whom sin belongs, but to whom salvation is freely given, be happily ushered onto that Other Shore and into that Greater Light, where we will control no more, hurt no more, hunger no more, where God will wipe every tear from every eye. Amen.