

Sermon – Sunday November 6, 2022

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The Pew Research Center says that only 67 percent of Americans are Christians. The center predicts a continuing decline so that by 2070 fewer than 35 percent of Americans will claim to be Christians. For the most part, people aren't leaving the Church to follow other faiths. They have no religion at all. Taking the Pew Research further than it actually extended, some people say that by the century's end, Christianity – basically the Christian Church -- will cease to exist.

On All Saints Day, I'm here to tell you that those experts are wrong. They are wrong because they forget that God brings resurrection out of death. God brought new life to all those saints whose names we read today. They all experienced trials and tribulations in their lives. They endured times when their faith cost them – perhaps a friend, some of their pride, or some of their money. They endured times of hopelessness. They experienced illness and departure from the world as we know it. They experienced all of that to rise again into a perfect state with God, surrounded by love. They gained victory in their decline.

God, who gives life to all the Church's saints, will give life to the Church. The Church has undergone many trials and tribulations, just like its saints. In the early days, many of the saints were executed. Then Constantine converted to Christianity and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. He made life easier for Christians. Throughout the ages, Christianity has had easy and rough times, such as reformation periods and times when philosophers and some in society said God was dead.

We might expect that Christianity flourishes best during those good times – those times of relative peace and lack of persecution. Interestingly, Christianity spread more widely in the one hundred years before it was tolerated in the Roman Empire. Its influence broadened when becoming a Christian meant persecution and even death. Interest in Christianity also grew during the Protestant Reformation and three generations later during the Great Awakening. The Church languished during the days preceding the Reformation, and the American Church struggled before the Great Awakening. The Church declined during both of these times because it became too much like secular society, with people favoring comfort over making the sacrifices necessary to truly follow Christ. When reformers or great preachers like Jonathan Edwards persuaded people to take their commitment to faith seriously, the Church thrived. The New Church created in each instance didn't necessarily look as it did before, just like our Resurrection bodies won't look like our earthly ones. (Thank God.) But the New Church was more vibrant.

Modern-day saints like us can learn lessons about living from those who have preceded us. And we can learn lessons about how to work with God to re-create the Church in our generation by looking at how the Church re-created itself through the leadership of the Holy Spirit in previous ages. You see, everything starts with us as individual saints. It goes right back to how we live and the priority we give to the teachings of Jesus.

The disciples had to leave everything to follow Jesus. They made following Jesus the priority of their lives. Those who were rich left the comforts of their homes and money to live in tents and follow Jesus throughout Israel. They left their businesses. It's easy for us to think of Peter, Andrew, James, and John as fishermen who eked out a modest living. But most evidence is that James and John, at least, were relatively wealthy. Fishing was a big business for them. The disciples and other early saints were even willing to give up their lives to do what Jesus asked them to do. They kept telling others about Jesus and putting the worship of God above the worship of objects and the emperor, no matter what.

The Reformers were willing to give up a lot to bring the Church back to where it was supposed to be. They reoriented the Church from one that was comfortable and fit in with secular society to one that helped the poor, sought justice, and loved unconditionally, even if these actions meant they split off from the institutional Church.

So, in 2022, the Church is in a period of decline. It's in trouble. God will ensure that the Church survives, but God will do that through the Holy Spirit working in us – the saints. God will do it when we all go back to the basics of Christianity. These basics are:

- Tell others about Jesus. Tell them what Jesus has done for you and how Jesus can help them.
- Put the mission of spreading God's love in the world above everything else. Ask ourselves, what do I, as an individual, need to do to spread God's love more fully? Then ask, what does my church need to do? The answer may mean that we need to go out more in our communities, or it may mean we need to rethink how we can better use the resources we have to reach more people – not just to make our lives comfortable.
- Live out a theology of abundance and hope rather than scarcity and despair. Christianity is all about hope and achieving the impossible through Christ. After all, scientifically, the resurrection is impossible. Yet, the basis of our faith is that it really happened. Not only did Jesus rise from the grave, but the relatives we celebrate here have also done so. But resurrection isn't only about the eternal. It's also about bringing new life from the ashes into every aspect of our lives.

The world – and our local communities – will realize that the Church is relevant today when it sees its saints acting differently than the rest of the world. If we love better than the world, the community will see our way as the best way. If we live in hope, the community will want to live that way too.

All Saints Day honors the contributions those before us have made to our faith and the Church. We also recommit on this day to living as saints in that Church too. The Church is the body of the saints united in Christ. When we live as saints as our ancestors did, the Church will always live and thrive.