

## **Rise Up, You Saints of God**

**An attorney friend of mine went to Puerto Rico to do some pro bono law for residents after Hurricane Maria devastated the island. When he got there, he could not believe he was on American territory. The after-effects of the hurricane had left most of the island without power. Many people still had no drinking water, or water to bathe, or even to flush their toilets. There was limited food and cell service, and lines to get gas stretched for blocks.**

**After returning back to Arizona, my friend said that his experience in Puerto Rico had resulted in a spiritual crisis. He said, “I felt like crying out, ‘God, do you know what you’re doing, because I sure don’t?’”**

**I understood his point. With the massive hurricanes, the Mexican earthquake and California wildfires, we are likely to ask, “Where is God when disaster strikes?”**

**When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, a young man, seeing all the suffering in the city, complained bitterly to God, “Even I could make a better world than this one!”**

**To which God replied, “That’s what you’re supposed to do!”**

**Maybe that’s why, with all the problems in our world today, you and I need to celebrate All Saints Day.**

- **We need to believe that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13).**
- **We need to believe that God’s grace is sufficient for our every need (2 Cor. 12:9).**
- **We need to believe that with God nothing is impossible (Mt. 19:26).**
- **We need to believe that nothing can separate us from the love of God – not pain or sorrow or distress or natural disasters or even death (Rom. 8:35-39).**
- **We need to believe that God’s Holy Spirit empowers us to be saints who can change the world.**

**Yes, you and I are saints of God!**

**You may be saying to yourself, “Gary, I’m no saint.” But you are! The Bible says that every Christian is a saint.**

**Every Christian has inherited eternal life. Every Christian has been given the Holy Spirit. Every Christian by virtue of baptism has been commissioned for ministry. If we have a little faith, and a lot of love, and a big vision, we can do amazing things.**

**Let me tell you about two very different priests who have inspired me over the years – people who did what everybody else thought couldn't be done.**

**The first is my friend Philip Wilson who was appointed Rector of the Church of the Redeemer in Morristown, New Jersey. At the time it was a struggling congregation with only a handful of people and not much energy, money or vision. The bishop told Philip that he would be the church's last rector, and that his job was to close the place down.**

**But Philip had other ideas. He saw enormous potential in this congregation. He envisioned a community of liberation, open and inclusive, reaching out to marginalized people with need-meeting ministries. The rectory was transformed into a hospice for the poor. The church began serving meals to hundreds of people six days a week. A pastoral counseling center was established along with job coaching. He invited everyone to receive communion, whether baptized or not, because he believed that Jesus excluded no one from table fellowship. He even developed new liturgies and an expanded liturgical calendar that was used by several clergy in the diocese.**

**People who had suffered bad experiences with church, or who had never considered attending church before, began flocking to Redeemer because it was a safe and welcoming place with relevant, practical sermons and caring, compassionate community. By the time Philip retired, he left a thriving and financially viable congregation poised for the next stage of ministry.**

**When I look at what Philip accomplished at Redeemer, I see the power of God's love to raise a church from the dead. Do you believe that? Do you believe there is no challenge we saints cannot face if God calls us to it? Often what we lack is not the means to make a difference, only the vision.**

**Let me tell you about another priest, very different from Philip, both in theology and style of ministry, who also had a little faith, a lot of love and a big vision. His name is Canon Robert Hulse, the now retired Rector of St. John's Anglican Church, Elora, Ontario in Canada.**

**When Bob Hulse was assigned to St. John's almost fifty years ago, it was a sleepy, little country church. Young priests who had completed their curacy were assigned to St. John's as Rector of their first parish. Clergy would**

**stay for three to five years, and if they had done a decent job, would then be moved by the bishop to bigger and better churches.**

**But Bob Hulse was different. He committed himself to that parish for his entire ministry – 38 years – not just to take life easy but to transform the church and the village into a center of music and the arts.**

**So Bob got to work. He built up the music program into one of the finest in North America under his brilliant music director Noel Edison. After a car accident, Bob took the proceeds of his monetary award and began an Anglican day school for boys and then girls. The school began in a modest building in Elora but soon had to move outside the village where today, on a beautiful campus that includes a magnificent chapel at its center, St. John's Kilmarnock Anglican School in Waterloo, Ontario serves over four hundred boys and girls.**

**But Bob did not stop there. Along with his music director, Bob founded what is now the Elora Three Centuries Festival that hosts entertainers and musicians from around North America. All the concerts are held in the village churches.**

**By the way, the music at St. John's, Elora is so good that the choir has produced more CDs under the Naxos label than any other church in Canada – music that is enormously popular not only in Canada but in our own country and Europe.**

**Bob Hulse proved that you can grow a church in secular Canada and still be thoroughly Anglican in your theology and style of ministry. Rooted in scripture and tradition, Bob is an open evangelical who is always willing to think outside the box and explore new ways of reaching people with the gospel. His all-inclusive love has attracted people far and wide, and his radical hospitality never turned anyone away.**

**It's amazing, isn't it, what we saints can do when we let the power of God kindle our faith; melt our mediocrity; challenge our complacency; and move us to miracles we can scarcely now imagine?**

**People in this parish have asked me, "What do you think of Nativity?" I tell them that there is nothing this parish can't accomplish if God wills it and we want it. This parish has all the resources to do any ministry that God is calling it to do. In fact, I believe this parish is called to accomplish something so great that it will be a**

**certain failure unless God is in it.**

**I am not talking here only about growing our numbers, or stabilizing our finances, or even completing our church campus, though all are important. I am talking about the church as God has purposed it in this time and place.**

**There is a reason Nativity exists in north Scottsdale, and that is to promote a life-giving, love-making religion that glorifies God and builds up people for the journey of living a meaningful and purposeful life as a followers of Jesus.**

**I think there is something profoundly attractive about the Episcopal way of being Christian that we can offer and Arizona needs – a reasonable, balanced, thoughtful, inclusive Christianity, a religion of mind and heart that encounters God in word, sacrament, service and fellowship – a church of roots and wings, grounded in tradition but soaring into the future.**

**I think at this time in the brief history of this parish, God is calling us to move beyond our comfort zone, to stretch ourselves, and to see opportunities for ministry when we are tempted only to see obstacles. Nativity has**

**already identified itself as a church that transforms lives through God's love in Jesus. In this church we are called:**

- To combine creative evangelism and compassionate outreach with inclusive community.**
- To be a safe haven for seekers and doubters even as we proclaim and worship Jesus as Lord and Savior.**
- To be grounded in Christ, affirming our diversity and standing where Episcopalians have always stood – at the theological center between a false fundamentalism and a reckless rationalism.**

**I believe in the Episcopal way of being Christian because I know deep in my heart that the church of Jesus Christ is the last best hope for humanity. How can I say this? Because the church is a sign of that community which the whole world is called to become – a community of love and acceptance and forgiveness where everyone has a place at the table and no one is outcast.**

**What is needed now is a new enthusiasm for what it means to be the church in the 21st century – a new**



**commitment to seek the mind of Christ in prayer – a new vision – not of things as they are, but of things as they can be – a willingness to risk and try some new things; to explore new ways to be a more caring, a more committed congregation that builds a bridge between church and culture, sacred and secular.**

**On this All Saints Sunday, we officially kick off our annual stewardship appeal. The wardens, vestry members and I are submitting our pledge cards today. I hope, after sufficient prayer and reflection, you will return your pledge card to the church between now and Thanksgiving Sunday. But what I really want from you is not so much your money as your heart. I want your commitment to God, Christ and the Church. I want you to be intentional and deliberate about being a follower of Jesus.**

**I am asking you to be the saint God has called you to be. I am asking you to commit your life to our great God who uses the church to carry out his mission in the world. I am asking you to take to heart the words of St. Teresa of Avila who said: “Christ has no body on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with**

**which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless his people.”**

**There is no doubt about it. We saints can make a difference in this world. And that difference begins with our church. The work of Christ succeeds because generation after generation of the saints are willing to step out in faith and do whatever it takes to share God’s love with a world so desperately in need of that love.**

**A little boy in a New York City church on a bright, sunny day was captivated by all the stained glass windows. The father said to his son, “Those windows show pictures of the saints. Do you know who the saints are?” The little boy, looking at the brilliant windows, said, “Yes, the saints are the ones who the sun shines through.”**

**Never forget that, dear people. The saints are the ones who the Son of God shines through. They are the body of Christ in the world. If the people in our hurting world are to know and believe in Jesus, it will be because of us.**

**So go on, become the saint God wants you to be, and let your light shine.**

**Dr. Gary Nicolosi**

**November 5, 2017**

**Text – Revelation 7:9-17; I John 3:1-3**

**All Saints Sunday, A**