
Good Company

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Sunday after All Saints' Day – Year C**

I heard a story recently about a woman named Joani Arrigoni, who, at 51 years young, is living with early onset Alzheimer's.^[1] Her husband, Joe, serves as her full-time caregiver, a role that regularly tests the limits of his patience and compassion. Joe recalled one especially hard day last March when Joani kept insisting that she had no shoes to wear and needed to go to the store immediately to buy some (this in spite of the fact that her closet was filled with sneakers, high heels, flats, and boots of nearly every imaginable style and color.)

Eventually, Joe said, he just couldn't take it any longer so he drove his wife to a department store. When they got there, he settled into a comfy chair to relish a few moments' peace while Joani approached a sales associate. Soon, though, he heard his wife's voice echoing from across the room, loud and distressed. Heading over to see what was wrong, he found that when the woman brought out that instrument that measures your foot—you know, the one where you have to stand up and push your heel to the very back while they slide a piece of metal against your instep—when the sales associate brought out the instrument that measures your foot, his wife bent over and, instead of putting her foot into it, she put in her hand. Realizing instinctively that she had done something wrong though not at all sure what, she burst into tears of embarrassment and frustration.

Joe prepared to collect his wife and leave the store immediately. But then, he said, something remarkable happened. The sales associate, unfazed by Joani's outburst, put an arm around her shoulder and began speaking to her in soothing tones. "It's all right," she repeated, again and again. "It's all right. don't worry. Some things in life are hard. I struggle, too." This woman went on to explain that she had autism and anxiety and often found it difficult to complete tasks that others performed with ease—getting into an elevator full of strangers, for example, or making small talk in the checkout line at the grocery store. *Some things in life are hard. I struggle, too.*

I used to view the saints—those extraordinary women and men of faith whom we remember especially on this day—I used to view the saints basically as religious versions of Wonder Woman and Captain America, superheroes able to leap over tall buildings in a single bound, or at least with a single prayer. As I learned more about them, though, I discovered that the saints were clay footed just like the rest of us. I learned that, in the case of the great 16th century mystic Theresa of Avila, who was so revered that you can still go today and visit a shrine dedicated to one of her fingers—I discovered that in the case of Theresa of Avila, about half the people in her hometown adored her while the other half considered her a colossal nuisance. Reading the journals of Henri Nouwen, the beloved spiritual writer who abandoned a teaching post at Harvard to become an aide at a group home for people with profound physical and mental disabilities—reading the journals of Henri Nouwen, I learned that there were some Christmases when he found himself so depressed that he could barely get out of bed. And remember after Mother Theresa's death, how a great hue and cry went up because it turned out that the humble little woman from Calcutta—the one who gently ladled soup into the mouths of thousands of beggars—had experienced significant anger management issues during her lifetime as well as a very long dark night of the soul? Remember that? It came as a total shocker to pretty much the whole world.

Now the point of all this is not to trash talk anyone, least of all the great titans of our faith. No, the point is to remember that what has typically made the saints who they were was not any kind of spiritual perfection. They did not get "all A's" on their religious report card—far from it. When they affirmed their commitment to following Jesus just like we will in a few minutes—when they affirmed their commitment to following Jesus, they, too, had to ask for God's help Looking back through Church history, if there is one thing the great saints seem to have

had in common is that they knew to whom they belonged. They knew to whom they belonged; namely, to God and to each other. They lived their lives—even those like Julian of Norwich who were hermits and lived in seclusion—they lived their lives out of a profound sense of this connectedness. They knew very clearly that when they struggled, they did not struggle alone. They could lean on God and they could lean on each other.

Today is a day for remembering that you and I do not struggle alone, either. That when we put a foot (or a hand) wrong; when we hurl insults at those to whom we had wanted to speak words of love; when we find it hard to get out of bed because we are so profoundly depressed; when we fail once more in our attempt to break the vicious cycle of addiction; when we become all but consumed by the sirens of pettiness and jealousy and greed; when we mourn desperately the loss of a loved one; when we inhabit a place of near total darkness and despair—when we find ourselves embroiled in these battles, we are in good company. Good company in the sense that our forebears in the faith wrestled with them just as we do. Good company, too, in the sense that they cheer us on in our struggles still. They root for us and they encourage us to root for each other, too.

Which may, after all, be what it means really to be a saint, on this side of heaven or the other. “Bear one another’s burdens,” Paul told the early Christians in some of the churches of Galatia, “and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Or as Jesus himself noted, “By this the world will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another.” Leaping over tall buildings with a single prayer is optional. Amen.

^[1] www.npr.org, from the “My Unsung Heroes” series, 10/29/22