

Kerry R. Mansir
Christ Church Gardiner
All Saints Sunday
November 1, 2020

Three years ago, I walked into this sanctuary on All Saints Sunday a few minutes before the 7:30 service was to begin, and Bob Ellis called me over to his pew—right over there behind the organ, where he and Ellen, and at times their children, have worshiped for many, many years, and he said, I know the church looks kind of empty this morning, but it's not. He said, I can see the pews full of all the people that have worshiped here over the years. Some of them, my friends, he said, that have passed on. But they're still here. These pews are full with them.

This morning, looking out at you all...spread out in the pews to maintain a safe distance during this pandemic, Bob's words come back to me. I like to think we're just making space this morning for the communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses that always surrounds us.

Over the years, the Church has pronounced sainthood on certain Christians believed to be especially faithful to the message of Jesus, people that made us aspire to be better Christians ourselves. But if we turn to the pages of the New Testament, particularly the Letters of Paul, we see that saints don't have to be super Christians. We're saints, too—regular people like us—called to reflect the love of God upon all those we meet and sometimes doing that better than at other times.

In the newsletter this week, I suggested that we all bring with us this morning, photos or mementos, or just the memories of some of the saints in our own lives that have died and that we remember today. Those saints from your life that you bring with you this morning, either in a picture or just in your memory, they probably weren't perfect people, I bet. But they shaped you and made you who you are today. Because we are inextricably bound with all those people that are part of our lives, living and dead. And even those that have died continue to love and encourage us and sustain us for the challenges of this life. Think about those people that you bring with you this morning—those you have loved and lost—how did they shape who you are today and how do they continue to sustain you with their love?

Yesterday, I spent a couple of hours moving the Hymnals, Bibles, and Prayer Books out of the pews in an effort to reduce the surface that might spread the coronavirus. What began as a job that I had dreaded turned into almost a spiritual exercise. As I stacked and moved each book, particularly the Books of Common Prayer, I thought of all the hands that had picked up those books over the years. The fingers that had thumbed through the pages looking for the order of worship or looking for a prayer that they needed to hear. And even though the order of worship you find in the bulletins this morning comes from our Prayer Book, there's something missing when we can't touch those red books, when we can't open them and read the prayers from them, knowing that other hands have held them and used them for worship, hands that are part of the communion of saints that is Christ Church.

The common prayer found in those red books has bound together Episcopalians and the entire Anglican communion over the past 500 years. And there's power in common prayer as one of you said to me this week. The Prayer Book teaches us

something about our life together, not just in the church, but in our society as a whole. A commentary on the BCP reminds us that it was common prayer more than common belief that sustained the Church of England during its upheaval in the 16th century. As the commentary said, the Prayer Book was born in the fires of reformation and revolution. If we think our country is divided today, think back to Elizabethan England when there had been years of violence between Catholics and Protestants. Christians were tortured and burned at the stake over differing beliefs. Thomas Cranmer and Queen Elizabeth and others who were responsible for the first prayer book of the Church of England, realized that they couldn't force particular beliefs upon people, but they could get people to come together in prayer. This common prayer was a way to seek healing among a divided people. Living in communion with one another did not require agreement on every theological point. "Praying together was the key."*

Learning to live peacefully with one another in community, continues to be vital to the health of our society. Particularly as we make our way through the election this week. What might an emphasis on common prayer mean for us as we walk through this divisive time in our nation? Desmond Tutu, a man who knew much about healing a divided country, wrote, "Common prayer means inviting both our friends and our enemies to join us in worshipping the God who loves not just some of us, but all of us."*

There may be times this week when we need to be reminded that we worship a God who loves not just some of us, but all of us. The Book of Common Prayer was written and shared as a way to seek healing among a divided people, and it continues to serve that holy purpose today. I hope this week that we, Episcopalians, and people of all faiths will turn to common prayer and seek that which binds us instead of that which divides us. And as we celebrate the communion of saints and our common prayer today, may we realize that it is communion with one another that defines who we are. We are connected with those who have come before us, those who sit beside us now, and those who will come after us. We are connected to those who will vote differently than we do on Tuesday.

And remembering those connections, remembering our communion, is what will bring the possibility of healing as we move forward, from this election and from this polarizing time.

And so to close, I will turn to our common prayer, our Book of Common Prayer, and share the wisdom that is found there for these days and these circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Prayer for an Election

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Prayer for Times of Conflict

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

- *The Book of Common Prayer: A Spiritual Treasure Chest—Selections Annotated and Explained* Annotations by The Rev. Canon C.K. Robertson, PhD