

Saints and sinners: Mark 12:28-34

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

It always breaks my heart a little when an elderly member of my congregation dies after decades of service and faithfulness. It breaks my heart a little more when only a handful of members attend the funeral of a shut-in. But on the Day of All Saints the names of these people who have passed on are read with reverence and thanks in front of the entire congregation. “For all the saints who from their labors rest,” we sing.

Who are all these saints? Most churches don’t generate much excitement by talking about the early saints (the ones with “St.” in front of their names). Even though many of the hymns for this day refer to the saints of old who shone in glory, most of us prefer saints closer to home. Our communion of saints is a more familiar crowd—those who died in our congregations in the past year, our own parents and grandparents. We’re also more apt to remember those famous saints who lived closer to our own lifetimes. Because we share the same century with them, we remember Mother Teresa and Cardinal Joseph Bernardin more often than St. Teresa or St. Joseph. It’s a great day to remember all of those who have gone before us, the ones on whose shoulders we stand, the ones whose lives and witness have brought us to this new day.

We can study the history of our faith and proudly say we are where we are today because our ancestors in the faith raised their voices, made bold decisions and prayed and taught the faith. We are where we are today because our ancestors were willing to go to jail, to be thrown to the lions and be burned at the stake. We are here today because our ancestors fought for religious freedom, braved and explored a new world to establish churches in America and spread the gospel. They did all these things because they loved Jesus, but also because they loved us, their descendants whom they would never know. They loved us so much that they wanted to make sure the story of the gospel was here for us. We are who we are today because of their faith, devotion and bravery. Rise up, O saints of God!

But wait a minute. These saints were not our only ancestors. Isn't it also true that we are here today, that we are who we are, in the condition in which we find ourselves, because we also had biological and spiritual ancestors who sat on their hands, who cared only for themselves, who thought little about the impact of their actions on future generations? We are also the products of those who were apathetic in their witness. We are the biological and spiritual descendants, for example, of those who advocated a racially segregated society. We are related to people who argued against women's ordination. And we may have to admit that some in our heritage shrugged their shoulders in the face of oppression and greed. We are products both of those ancestors who fought for the faith and of those who fought against the faith. We are the descendants of both sets of grandparents. We have saints in our blood and skeletons in our closets.

Congregations too are the spiritual grandchildren of wonderful stewards who gave their all, and of generations of curmudgeons who threw water on the Spirit's fire every chance they got. What type of ancestor do we, who by baptism are part of the communion of saints, hope to be?

One of these All Saints Days our names will be read. We are the potential saints for future generations. We are the shoulders on which others will stand. Will we be ancestors who sat on their hands or ancestors who raised their hands? Sometimes we forget that we aren't just living our busy lives. We're also laying a foundation, molding a future and establishing a legacy. How is it going?

There breaks a yet more glorious day, saints triumphant rise in bright array. Will we leave a legacy of justice or will we leave a bequest of selfishness? Those we admire as witnesses to Christ are the ones we believe are our best examples of living the simple commands of Jesus to love God with our whole selves and our neighbor as ourselves. Those who do, Jesus said, are not far from the kingdom of God. Being a saint means living in hope and not in despair. It means forgiving, not judging; loving, not despising; lifting up, not tearing down. Being a saint means that you can mock evil (what we do on Halloween) rather than being afraid of it or controlled by it.

In this dying of the year, this time of harvest, we would do well to take stock as well as reminisce. When the low G sounds on the organ, announcing the beginning of R. Vaughan Williams's tune to the hymn "For All the Saints," I feel as though the rumbling of that low bass note calls us to worship the communion of saints. It is a call to St. Peter and St. Paul, to Mary Magdalene and Mother Teresa, to Martin Luther and Martin Luther King Jr. As we remember these strong shoulders on which we

stand, we are challenged to strengthen our own shoulders. We are ancestors in the making after all, saints for a generation yet unborn. It is an awesome opportunity. Rise up, O saints of God!