"A New Creation"
November 2, 2025
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2 Corinthians 5:15-17 (NRSVUE)

15 (Jesus) died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for the one who for their sake died and was raised.
16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. **17** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!

Why do we celebrate "All Saints Sunday?" We are Protestants, after all, and we pride ourselves for not revering the saints of the Catholic tradition or elevating some people above others. Of course, we have both English and German influences in the United Methodist Church, so we still hold some of the Anglican traditions as well as those of the continental reformers. But our focus on this day is *not* on those *officially* declared saints of the Church.

Merriam-Webster defines *saint* with one of three meanings:

1. one officially recognized, especially through canonization, as preeminent for holiness (not our thing)
2. one of the spirits of the departed in heaven (close, though I have some questions about parts of that definition)
3. a member of any of various Christian bodies

Now that you've heard those definitions, raise your hand if you think you are a saint. Raise your hand if you think you are a sinner. Actually, in the way we understand saints and sinners, we all should raise our hands for both. We are, each of us, both saint and sinner. We are, in the words of Martin Luther, *simul justus et peccator,* at the same time both justified and sinful. We are *all* sinners saved by grace.

But we set aside a special day to recognize our "saints" as those who walked alongside us in faith and have died and crossed from this life to the next. They are the ones who paved the way before us. You don't have to be perfect to be a saint. No one is. Though, we often show more charity to the deceased than we do to the living, including ourselves. Those we remember as saints weren't perfect. You don't have to be, either.

The saints we honor today no longer have to struggle with the pains of this life. Their race is now finished, and they rest from their labors. Even in our grief at their absence, we can rejoice in the knowledge that they are held forever in the arms of God and that, one day, we will be reunited with them. They have joined the company of the saints who have gone before, the great cloud of witnesses. In a way, we keep them alive in us by remembering them – both their merits and their flaws. We honor their legacies: the life they had, the love they shared, the faith they imparted. Above all else, it is that faith that gives us hope today.

If we are, indeed, a mixture of both saint and sinner, how do we hold the tension between our sinful nature and our saintly calling? What is it about our faith that gives us hope? And how can honoring our saints guide us toward the life God desires for us?

This month, we are exploring one of the most distinctive teachings of our Methodist heritage: *the doctrine of sanctification*. Sanctification is a theological term that means "being made holy." You might not feel particularly holy, nor much like the sound of *being made* holy. After all, "holy" in our culture has a negative connotation. It suggests either *being set apart* or *being above others.* We sometimes say a person has a "holier than thou" attitude. I don't think any of us want to be like that. I don't think God wants that for us, either.

When John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, talked about sanctification or holiness, he meant simply "becoming what God intended us to be." We were made to be in relationship with God. But closeness with God doesn't exactly come naturally to us. We tend to want to go our own way, to focus too much on ourselves or our own desires. Left to our own devices, we often get our priorities out of order. That's part of what it means to be human. Wesley said, "It is as natural for a human being to mistake as to breathe."[1]

To demonstrate God's desire to be in relationship with us, Wesley used three "movements," if you will, from the biblical narrative. The first is Adam, who represents God's creative intent for us. Whether you believe that there was literally a person named Adam at the dawn of creation is inconsequential. Wesley spoke of Adam for what he represents, not as a historical figure. The story of Adam in Genesis is about God creating humans to be close to God. But that closeness didn't last. Adam fell, and the perfect relationship was lost. Again, it is not required to believe literally in "The Fall;" only to know what it represents. Humans were not capable on our own of being perfectly in relationship to God.

The second movement was Moses – namely the law God instituted *through* Moses. Mosaic law created a model society built on guidance, ceremony, and structure. The law contained specific instructions, celebrations of the law as a gift from God, and consequences for failing to follow those instructions. But God also provided a method for remediation, a way to repair fractures in the relationship through rituals, offerings, and sacrifice. The point of the law was to move us

over time to a place of justice, compassion, wholeness, and wisdom. Though that system of Mosaic law produced a people called and set apart, it did not fully repair the relationship. Humans continued to go their own way, even to act against their own well-being.

So, God instituted a third movement: the incarnation. By coming to us in Christ, God established a new way. Jesus became like a "new Adam," a chance to start over. In Wesley's understanding, Jesus was not only God-with-us, but also the perfect example of what it looks like to be fully in relationship with God. God was uniquely present in Jesus, and Jesus was completely in connection with God.

This third movement institutes what we call justification, the state of being restored in relationship with God. In Jesus, God took on all our flaws and failures. The cross gathered up of all the rubble of our sin and destroyed it forever. But it didn't end at the cross. Resurrection was God's ultimate answer to death, breaking the bonds that hold us back and freeing us for joyful relationship. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul insisted that "Jesus died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for the one who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Corinthians 5:15). *Relationship restored.*

But we should not understand sin and redemption only as individual actions that affect a personal relationship with God. Sin can also be the collective actions that impact our wider human family. Collective sins include the structures and systems that trap people in poverty, that deprive people of health, that relegate people to the margins and treat them as though they are of less value than others, that consider some people as expendable or collateral damage. What Christ did to break the power of sin for us as individuals, he also did to break the power of sinful structures and systems. There is tremendous brokenness in the world. But we need not cower in the face of seemingly insurmountable evil and oppression. We can stand up to it with courage and confidence, knowing that God has already claimed the ultimate victory.

The point of justification is to lead us toward sanctification. To put it more plainly, Jesus clears away of the rubble that obstructs our path to God, restoring our relationship and moving us on a path toward completeness. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ's action opens the path toward sanctification – being made holy. We sometimes also refer to this as "Christian perfection." That doesn't mean that Christians are perfect (you thought being holy sounded far-fetched!). We are far from it. So, what do we mean by perfection? You'll have to wait for next week when Rev. Patterson explores that. But I'll give you a hint: it's all about love.

Love is and always has been the goal. It was for love that we were made. Love is the underlying value of every commandment of God. God's love took on flesh in Jesus and showed us how to

love God and one another. Love took on the sins of the world on the cross and emerged victorious from the empty tomb. Love is what binds us to God and to one another.

What does all this have to do with remembering our saints? I said earlier that the saints we remember today weren't perfect. They weren't. But while we remember them today as they *were*, we also see them as they *are*. What God did in Christ makes possible the hope that we still carry, even on this side of eternity. God's work in them is now complete. We feel tremendous sadness for our loss, but we can also rejoice in their gain. They are where we all one day long to be. Just as those who are now at rest in God have been made perfect forever, so God is in the process of perfecting us.

Friends, what God desires most is to be in relationship with us. And God will stop at nothing to restore that relationship. Today, as we remember our saints and as we worship in the presence of this great cloud of witnesses, let us remember, give thanks, and celebrate the love that binds us together. Let us also remember God's desire to be in relationship with us, here and now. The love we celebrate is greater than our mistakes, greater than fear, greater than death itself. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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