

## FOR ALL THE SAINTS

**Sandy Reimer**

**Sunday, November 1, 2009**

It's no accident that this worship theme of "Smashing Idols" comes right on the heels of last week's Reformation Sunday. If you remember your European history or your church history, the Reformation began in the early 1500s with Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, in which he argues that the church had imprisoned the gospel and the word of God in a complex system of corrupt practices and hierarchy. Individuals, Luther insisted, must be free to read the word of God for themselves and free to pray to God without intermediaries. Other reformers followed Luther, each one in their own country, each one in their own way, seeking to bring new life and breath into the church. The Catholic church itself took measures to deal with its own abuse and corruption.

The changes that ensued in the European religious landscape between 1500 and the late 1700s were widespread. Unfortunately, in so many situations, the struggles over reforms in reform religious thought and practice were co-opted by the political powers of the time. And then it was the people who suffered, both Catholics and Protestant, from ruthless persecution. In England, the pendulum of power switched back and forth at mind-boggling intervals between Catholic and Protestant Kings and Queens. Those who did not recant and conform to the current group in power were condemned as heretics, imprisoned and tortured at best, executed at worst. In one of those changes of power, within four years, all Catholic monasteries in England were closed and the priests were pensioned off, cast off, or executed. The Catholic churches were stripped of all their wealth, furniture, and art and then left to decay. Religious relics were burned. And, the statues of saints, considered to be idol-worship by the Protestant reformers, were smashed. No more saints in churches, no more saints to pray to, no more saints to intercede on behalf of believers. The smashing of the replicas of saints was a visible symbol of the smashing that occurred on all sides of the theological spectrum, indiscriminately destroying whatever and whoever was in its direct path. So while we who stand in the reformed Protestant tradition gained much in the Reformation in terms of freedom of belief, we as spiritual descendants of the Christian tradition also lost a lot in terms of a heritage of spiritual practice.

One of my grandmother's favorite sayings was, "Don't throw out the baby with the bath water." And that, in my opinion, is what happened to the concept of saints in the protestant and reformed churches for several centuries. To be sure, the excessive veneration of saints in the medieval church, along with the belief that we need to pray through the intercession of a Saint to capture God's attention, needed reforming. Yet, we would be wise to consider what we lost as well as what we might recover as a meaningful sense of saints.

I resonate with the concept of a saint as the human face, the human story, of what it means to be a person of faith. I sometimes think of saints as icons, whose lives illuminate my own beliefs and passions, whose lives inspire me in my own spiritual journey. What I love about All-Saints Day is its inclusivity. Notice it's ALL Saints Day. It's not just martyrs day, not just cloistered saints day, not just especially pious saints day, not just famous saints day –it's ALL Saints day. So I like to keep a list of my own saints, who are rarely the Saints I find pictured or named in church history. I was excited to see at

Grace Cathedral in San Francisco an icon of Saint Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, who was subsequently murdered.

I have my own public saints: people like Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained as a minister; like Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood; like theologian and preacher William Sloane Coffin. And I have my personal saints: people like Mrs. Wilson, my high school guidance counselor; John Vannorsdall, my college chaplain; my maternal grandmother and grandfather, Lillian and Raymond Reynolds; and Mary Miller, a wonderfully wise woman in our church in Connecticut.

Paul Tillich said that "a saint is not a saint because he or she is particularly good or noble or sacrificial, but instead because he or she is a person who is transparent for something larger than he or she is." Frederick Buechner expands that sense of saints to include "all the foolish and wise ones, the shy and overbearing ones, the broken and whole ones, who, one way or another, helped us in our own lives to whatever little we may have or ever hope to have of some kind of seedy sainthood of our own."

In that light today, we remember our saints, because they were and are part of the larger picture of our lives. We remember them because they are dear to us: our own mothers and fathers, partners and spouses, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, children and grandparents, friends and mentors, pastors and teachers, doctors and counselors. Some of our saints we loved with great intimacy. Some of them we loved without even knowing that we loved them at the time. Some nurtured us, cherished us, taught us and worked with us. Some influenced us in ways that we did not understand or even appreciate until much later in our lives.

In early Celtic Christian tradition, people believed that the separation between earth and heaven is wafer thin at this time of year and that the souls of our loved ones and friends are particularly close and accessible to us. They would gather on All Hallows' Eve (what we now call Halloween) and sit around a fire sharing memories and stories of those people who had died, those people who were saints in their lives.

Today, we too will remember and name our saints, first those UCG members who have died in this past year, and then during Communion, those dear ones in our own lives who have helped us become in some way who we are and who we hope to be. And so we are grateful to them, we remember them, we bless them, we pray for them, and we trust that they also pray for us. May their gifts be with us forever, the surprising treasures that we carry within us and then pass on others and to the world in an unbroken chain of love that links us to eternity.

We pause now to remember those members of our congregation who have died since last All Saints Day: Madeline Chance, Sylvia Coleman, Bill Drummond, Deborah Holmes Howard, and David Reiser.

### **Benediction:**

From the flowing of the tide to its ebbing,  
From the waxing of life to its waning,  
May you be led by God's light;

May you be renewed by God's grace;  
And may you be held in God's arms. Amen.