Our Saints
All Saints; November 1, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

As some of you know, I am taking piano lessons. A couple of weeks ago, my teacher told me to choose a song by Billy Joel to work on. I chose one of my old favorites, "Only the Good Die Young." Having now worked on it for two weeks, I fear it was a bad choice. "Only the Good Die Young" is all about rhythm, which is not something I have.

Despite that, I love the song. But this week, I have been a little troubled by one of its lines. Billy sings that he would "rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints. The sinners are much more fun."

When I first heard that line, I was young and living a decadent life, and I shared Billy's view. But not now.

Alcohol was a big part of my young adulthood, and it was fun. But if I had continued to drink like I drank in my early twenties, there is no question that I would have become an alcoholic, and I've seen enough people struggle with addiction to know that addiction isn't fun at all.

But Billy's line about sinners having more fun misses the point in another way that is relevant to our readings for this morning.

People who study happiness have found that there are at least two ways to measure it. One is to ask people how they feel right this minute. The other is to ask people how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole. It turns out, the answers to those questions can be quite different.

What people most enjoy in the moment is physical pleasure. People are happy while they are eating. If you catch me with a bowl of ice cream, you can be pretty sure I'll be in a good mood. This is what I assume Billy means about sinners having more fun (although he may not be thinking about ice cream!).

But even I don't want to eat ice cream continuously. That kind of fun gets old and doesn't make for a truly happy life.

The sharpest contrast to things like eating ice cream is taking care of very young children. I am not a baby person. If you asked me how happy I was in the precise moment when I was in charge of my children at ages three and one, the answer would usually be, not nearly as happy as when I was eating ice cream.

But if you ask me which has made my life better and richer and happier, ice cream or my children, the answer is easy. Pretty easy. My children.

The Christian life is often more like having children than eating ice cream. The Christian life is not fun in every moment. As Jesus acknowledges in our Gospel reading, it can involve mourning and even persecution.

But over time, the Christian life is the way to joy. We may mourn, but we will be comforted. And if we cultivate the virtues, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, or show mercy, or make peace, then we will see God and be called children of God.

Our epistle puts it even more clearly. It is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. I want it read at my funeral.

It begins with a reminder of who we are right now. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

That is already great. But it gets better. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”

We are children of God right now. And even if most of us don’t yet look much like Christ, we will. We will see Christ, and we will see that we have become truly Christ-like.

First John is telling us that we are gradually transformed over time by God’s grace into the people God created us to be. We’re not likely to get all the way there in this lifetime. But that is the journey we are on, and we will get there in the end.

I say again, the Christian life is a like having children. Not every minute is fun, but the ride as a whole is fabulous. Indeed, Billy notwithstanding, the ride as a whole is a LOT happier, a lot more fun, for the saints than for the sinners.

That is important to remember on All Saints Day. Today we commemorate the capital S Saints, the great saints of our tradition, the ones who, as best we can tell, travelled the farthest on the road to becoming truly Christ-like, the ones who can best show us what a life well lived looks like.

But for most of us, today is even more importantly about the lower-case s saints, the people in our lives who have gone before us, the ones who have made our lives richer and happier by showing us the way and helping us to make a little progress along it.

In a few minutes, we'll give thanks for some of our little-s saints. As we read the names aloud, I encourage you to think about your own saints and what they have meant in your life.

I always think first about my grandparents, particularly my grandmothers. But the person I've been thinking about this week is a friend named Larry Barmann, who died a little over a year ago.

When I was starting out as an academic, Larry was already well-established as a scholar in my field. I met him at a conference thirty years ago, and we immediately connected across a generation.

Larry was an impressive scholar and a generous mentor. But he was more than that, too. Larry was a person of integrity. He was a very committed Roman Catholic, and a very devoted faculty member at his university, and a very patriotic American. And, Larry spoke out courageously when he felt that his Church or his university or his country was acting in a way contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Probably most important for me, Larry was also a loyal friend. In the throes of my midlife crisis twenty years ago, Larry was one of a small number of people I could confide in. I told Larry things about my life that only a very few people knew.

I confided in Larry because I knew that Larry would hold my struggles with compassion, and that Larry would pray for me regularly, and that Larry would never betray my confidence in him.

I only learned about Larry's death after the fact. I probably couldn't have gone to his funeral anyway. But Larry is definitely one of my little-s saints, and I'm proud to offer a tribute to him this morning.

But, as our reading from First John reminds us, the point is not simply to remember the people who have been important to us. As we remember our saints, we also commit to following in the way that they lead.

Larry showed me what it means to be a friend, a mentor, a person of integrity, a Christian. And Larry, like every saint who has gone before us, challenges me to live like he lived, to become a little more Christ-like, and to experience the true happiness that comes from a life with God, which is a life of love.

And so, on this All Saints Day, I pray that God will help us to remember our saints with gratitude, and also to follow their examples with courage and faithfulness. In Christ's name. Amen.