

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on November 7, 2010 (All Saints' Sunday)

I'm not a big fan of tattoos. I'm not *morally* opposed to them, although I do think that if God intended for us to have butterflies on our shoulders or barbed wire around our biceps, we would have come out that way. Part of the reason I don't like them is that I can't stand needles but mostly it's because they're just so permanent. Of course skin does start to sag after awhile; so that cobra that looked so cool when you were 22 eventually morphs into what appears, upon closer inspection, to be a pile of oatmeal. When I was a kid the only people that had tattoos were Navy vets from World War I whose forearms sported barely visible, faded blue anchors. But things have changed so much that nowadays it's rare to find someone under 40 *without* a tattoo. The Pew Research Center claims that 40 percent of people between the ages of 25 and 40 have at least one tattoo. And, no, I don't think I'll be preaching this sermon on Nantasket Beach this summer.

Now the point here is obviously not to condemn anyone for having a tattoo. I'm sure there are plenty of them hiding in the pews this morning – you can show them to me at coffee hour if you must. And, anyway, some of my best friends have tattoos. Really. Ben's godfather – a seminary classmate of mine who was just called to be rector of St. John's in the Mountains in Stowe, Vermont – has a big *chi rho* tattooed to his left shoulder. Leave it to a Gen X priest to have an ancient Christian symbol for a tattoo.

A few months ago I read an article in the Wall Street Journal which addressed the popularity of tattoos among young people. And while the permanence is what scares *me* about tattoos, it is precisely what attracts many teenagers. As the Journal put it, "In a digital age of fleeting images and communications, family turbulence and rapid social change, the idea of making a commitment that lasts forever is attractive."

This speaks to me of a profound hunger for permanence but also of a profound responsibility to share our faith with the world. Because in the Gospel of Jesus Christ we have something more permanent than any tattoo. Through the sacrament of baptism we are marked as Christ's own forever. There is nothing more permanent than the relationship with God instituted at baptism. The bond created through water and the Holy Spirit is indissoluble. And while we may fall away at times, that relationship never fades, the invitation is always extended, it can never be removed. Being marked as Christ's own forever is not like one of those temporary tattoos kids get at street fairs; it is a permanent and indelible mark upon the soul; one that cannot later be removed with expensive and only somewhat effective laser surgery.

Which brings us to this great celebration of All Saints' Sunday. On this day we remember the many saints who have blazed the trail of faith. You see some of them all around you in stained

glass and each Sunday we are literally surrounded by a great cloud of saintly witnesses. Holy men and women who have proclaimed the gospel and lived the gospel and in some cases died for the gospel. They helped form the deep roots of the Christian faith that sustain us in our own daily walk with Lord. Our faith is no passing fad or innovation – it is ancient, tested, and true. Nor is it something past its prime, a relic of an earlier era of glory. The Spirit continues to move and draw us into new things both as a church community and as individuals called by God to live out the gospel in our own way and in our own time.

Which is why on this day we remember not just the famous saints – the ones immortalized in stained glass or statuary – but also the saints with a lower case “s.” People we have known and loved and lost over the years as well as those known to God alone. These “saints” may not have held the formal title. They may not have been able to produce a business card bearing the word “saint.” They didn’t seek recognition for their deeds, they simply followed Christ. And when you follow Christ, saintly things happen. You offer comfort to an afflicted stranger, you serve the poor, work for peace, uplift the oppressed. In this context, the Beatitudes – those familiar words from Matthew’s gospel – are not impossible demands but a thoughtful approach to how we should live out our mortal lives. How much better would it be to be remembered as a peacemaker or one who showed mercy or one who hungered and thirsted for righteousness than as one remembered for always returning e-mail within ten minutes, or never missing a day of work, or always having a clean powder room?

All Saints’ Day challenges us to look back and give thanks for the past even as it demands that we look forward. One day *our* names will all be listed in the All Saints’ Sunday bulletin whether here or at another church. Others will remember us and reflect upon the ways in which we influenced their lives. And while that speaks to the fleeting nature of the human condition, it also sounds a note of hope. Hope because we will one day take our place on the other side as members of the Communion of Saints. When we die our lives are not ended but changed; our perspective shifts but it doesn’t die.

And so we’re left with an opportunity. Because the way we will be remembered by those we leave behind is being written as we speak. We are forming our legacies right now. Are you happy with the story so far? Or do your priorities need a bit of editing? Our reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus makes it clear that there is only one way to secure an everlasting legacy: by glorifying God in your own day. Because when you glorify God in your own day, God never forgets your righteousness. It is indelibly written on God’s heart. And your name lives on generation after generation as a member of the Communion of Saints.

If you are truly looking for a way to leave a legacy; a way to encounter the permanence of the divine, live your life in Christ. Sow love, be kind to others, worship God intently; be a peacemaker, comfort the afflicted, be merciful to the poor. Tattoos eventually lose their vibrant color. But the glory of salvation through Jesus Christ never fades away.