

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. I John 3:1

Yesterday saw the conclusion of the 101st convention of our diocese, the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. 120 Episcopalians took their place in the councils of the church, lay and ordained, men and women, young and old. We shared the droll work of business that any organization must from time to time. We shared some humor and encouragement as we focused on evangelism and communication in a variety of settings and topics. We shared some tears as we remembered the dear ones whom we lost this past year.

Even our children gather, and enjoy a day long Vacation Bible School experience that has come to be called "Children's Convention". One of them, a fellow saint, yes, yet too young yet to vote, expressed in amazement as her mother picked her up at the end of the long day of legislation, "what, you all don't get to have craft time?" Many of us would have definitely voted for that.

We hear this morning from a letter preaching endurance to a fragile community besieged by persecutions and defections. The First letter of John, written by the same people or person who wrote the Gospel of John, serves a similar purpose. The community, called the Johannine community after its patron apostle, is the early church in Ephesus, that same community to which Paul wrote. If modern dating theory is right, the gospel and letters we treasure were written 50 years after Paul's work established the church in Ephesus.

What we know about this community at this time is that it was under siege by multiple forces draining it of energy. Roman persecutions frequently rose up and claimed the lives of many members who were not able to hide their affiliation. A theological debate had erupted into a division, focused on whether members believed that Jesus was fully human as well as divine. The defectors believed Jesus was more a spirit and not fully human. It would be another 200 years of church debates before this was settled for us who hold to the ever unfolding main stream of church theology.

And so having suffered a split and under constant threat of another bloody persecution, the leaders of this community write a letter to the membership. The letter does not contain a 5 point plan for revitalization, nor does it lay out succinctly the mistakes of those wayward disciples who left with their erroneous faith ideas. Instead, it is a letter of hope. The anxious Ephesians receive a letter that reiterates the apostle Paul's call for endurance and perseverance. The struggling community is reminded where their eyes are to look, where their vision is to come from.

The Johannine community is reminded of the same thing that we are reminded of on All Saints Day. We are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, whom God sees with his eternal eyes, an overwhelming vision of those who are, who were, and who are yet to come, all gathered together in rejoicing. We need but close our eyes and imagine this humble human home overflowing with the grace-filled souls of all who

are calling this place home, have called this place home, and most excitedly those who are yet to come and call this place home.

That vision is liberty from fear! How different the lives of those who worshiped here 75 years ago must have been. And so too how incredibly different the lives of those who will wander these halls 75 years from now will be. Yet we all gather together under the gaze of Almighty God, and know that we are all, as the 1st letter of John says,

The love of God binds us together; his vision for the renewed and reconciled creation made real in the holy procession. This vision of God's children all gathered today is why we recognize those incredible saints of the past, those markers of heroism, intelligence, passion, and mercy. Those incredible names, many of whom we heard earlier in our entrance litany, have blessed the church with their witness, and their memory inspires us now.

So too, any gathering of the church is an opportunity to celebrate the gathering of the Saints. Look around! Sure, you think of yourself of something less than a saint, and each year you hear on this day that yes, you are a saint. Of course you are! If you cannot see it in yourself, look at each other. See the stories that flow through the lives of those around you. Bear witness to the acts of heroism and mercy that we have borne here, hearts that have endured, souls that have humbly served, voices that have rejoiced. Each sharing their gifts. Each acting out their place as a blessed child of God.

And you are one of them! Those eyes you are looking into are looking back into your eyes and seeing the saint that you are. You see the saints next to you each Sunday at worship, reminding you of your place in the great cloud of witnesses. Those of us who go to convention see the saints gathered around, as well. We try with humble diligence to bind our lives together, and through the work of convention and congregation we try to reach for that more perfect relationship that Christ prays for us and that we all desire.

Yesterday's convention theme of communication and evangelism echoed the refrain that this work is hard only in that it demands us use our creativity and imagination. This imagination has a bright resource in All Saints Day. "Go. Create! Imagine the world anew! For the world is full of saints, you among many, and many waiting to join you in worship. The hard work of evangelism is helping others see their place amongst the children of God. Maybe craft time for us adults would work! For many, yes it would, craft time where every soul is given the chance to see God at work in the world. Creative time to see the world anew, with them now a saint rejoicing next to their brothers and sisters, Children of God all.

Hear again the words that John writes to his embattled community, full of saints that he desperately loves: See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are! Whenever we do the work of God, as congregation or convention, may we be shocked that others are not having as much

fun as us, busy creating, making real, the vision of God's love for all of us, his blessed children, saints from beginning to end.