FPCU All Saints' Sunday November 1, 2026 Rev. Dr. Tina Blair

Celebrating the Saints

Texts: Hebrew 12:1-2; Romans 16:1-16

Today is All Saints' Day! As I pondered the meaning of this, I started wondering, "How did I become such a committed Christian? Who planted the seeds?" And I immediately thought of my Godmother, whom I called Aunt Cissy, who lived in Birmingham, AL, where my parents were from. Whenever we were back in Alabama, visiting grandparents in Birmingham, Aunt Cissy would make sure I got to church on Sunday. And there was my mother, who insisted we go to church, even when we lived in New Delhi, India, where there was an American Church; she made sure I was confirmed. And there was my dad, with whom I spent Sunday afternoons listening to classical music -- learning to love God through choral works like Handel's "Messiah," and Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." My parents and so many teachers, relatives, church members contributed to my love of God, way before I had an even deeper experience of Jesus as I got older. I am so grateful for all these saints!

We think of saints as especially faithful people, don't we? Individuals who gave their life to be the hands of Jesus with the dying, the ill such as lepers, the poor and so forth. Others became martyrs to the faith – put to death for their love of Jesus. But this use of the word "Saint" is a Roman Catholic belief. We Protestants examined our Bibles and the teachings of the Apostle Paul. Paul calls everyone who is in the church, who knows the Savior, a saint. Saints are not perfect people – they are people who know they need God's forgiveness and grace, have accepted the gift of God's Son, and are working to be shaped by God's spirit into holy, sanctified people, showing forth the wonderful fruits of the Spirit (found in Galatians 5): love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, and so forth. A saint is each person, each one of us, who has accepted Christ as our Savior, because he is now in our lives, shaping us and sanctifying us throughout our life. One theologian calls All Saints' Day as "feast of splendid nobodies." The communion of saints, she adds is a community of memory and hope.

What saints nurtured and shaped your faith? What community of memory and hope rooted you in your faith in Christ Jesus? Who will you name and hold dear in your heart? Think back to your childhood – these might be persons you haven't thought about in years: a scoutmaster, a coach, a teacher, certain relatives. Or maybe they have just left us – or are still here. Maybe they only demonstrated

integrity or compassion rather than teaching you directly. But they are part of that quiet cloud of witnesses that formed you.

Last Tuesday, the session members (our church Board), shared about a saint that had shaped each one of them in the faith. It was a special time of stories of gratitude.

Paul too, can name particular people who have nurtured and instructed him in the faith. That's why I love this section of Romans 16, this list of people he asks to be remembered to. Notice the diversity in these names: some are Jewish, like Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, some Gentile, some with very Roman names, some not; they do different things: Phoebe is a *diakonos* which means, in that time, a minister; Andronicus and Junia are apostles, relatives who had been in prison with him; some are listed simply as hard workers, such as Mary, or as a coworker, like Urbanus. Others are simply beloved, as friends, as a being like a mother. We know that the churches in Rome were house churches: sometimes in a Jewish household, of decent means, such as that of Priscilla and Aquila who were tent-makers; sometimes Roman Gentile homes. Some were even in the crowded and dangerous slave quarters. In addition to the diversity of Jew and Gentile, male and female, therefore, we have also slave and free. No wonder Paul, when he writes to the Galatians, states that "there is no longer Jew or Greek (i.e. Gentile or pagan), there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28).

Notice that they are inventing what church is – it's the beginning of the Christian church's formation. They are constantly dealing with the whims of emperors, with financial issues, with controversies in their own ranks. They are continually in transition. In hindsight, though, they are the mothers and fathers, the creators, of our church!

All the saints make up a community, a community that extends through time and through space, what we call "the communion of saints." The communion of saints include all those who have gone before us, all those who are with us in this time, all those who will live in the future. It includes those who live near us and those who live far away: the church folk of So. Cal., and the church folk of Ghana, India, Guatemala, Kenya, Russia, France -- to name a few countries where I have known some of the saints. Like Paul's friends in Rome, many have left mortal life for eternal life and form a community beyond time and space – it is God's eternal community. These are the witnesses that encourage us on to follow Jesus in the

marathon that is life. How supported we are! How encouraged as we think of them! Let's remember and celebrate them today!

The question, though, is "what kind of community are we, we here on earth at this time and in this place?" Since we are Christ's Body here on earth, with Christ as our head, then how are we to live as Christ's community here on earth, linked to those who are now in eternity? We are in transition – and transition times are creative and creating times. They are times to affirm our faith, reconnect within our community of memory and hope, and most important, seek deeper guidance from our Lord Jesus.

This congregation has already made some decisions about this question, by re-crafting and reaffirming your Mission Statement. It reads:

Growing in Christ, Making Him Known, Welcoming All
First Presbyterian Church of Upland is rooted in God's grace, committed to spiritual growth across all generations, and dedicated to making Christ known through faithful witness, authentic relationships, generous hospitality, and compassionate service.

Let's dive in more deeply and then pray for God's guidance. Let's remember what we are committed to through our faith.

1. ***Growing in Christ***

First Presbyterian Church of Upland is rooted in God's grace,
committed to spiritual growth across all generations,
and dedicated to making Christ known….
"I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. "If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit." (John 15:5).
We can do nothing without God's grace – God's love and forgiveness -- in Jesus Christ. We gather to be grounded in the love of Jesus through worship with prayer and singing, the preaching of God's Word and the celebration of the sacraments. We gather to study the Holy Scriptures, to pray together and receive God's guidance and empowerment. We gather to celebrate and to become full members of this branch of the Body of Christ our Lord.

We are tasked with helping each other grow in our relationship with our Lord, to making him known to those you may not know him who are part of this church family. Whatever the age group, we strive to teach, to share, to witness to the reality of Jesus in our lives and in the world. We create education and faith

formation programs for our children throughout the year, from Sunday School to VBS. We nurture the blossoming of the Fruit of the Spirit *(Gal 5).*
I wonder: what educational programs have helped you grow in faith as a child – or here, as an adult?

2. *Making Him Known*

First Presbyterian Church of Upland is….
dedicated to making Christ known through faithful witness,
authentic relationships, generous hospitality, and compassionate service….

Jesus' last words to his disciples were: *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded. you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." (Matthew 28:19-20).*

In what ways can we witness to our love of God in Jesus Christ? I believe in 2 basic ways. First, we share our story and our experiences. We don't bully or sound coercive when we are sharing honestly our own experiences, our own encounters with Jesus in our lives. Second, we model and live our faith. People are most persuaded when they see people who show generosity, kindness, peacemaking, and forgiveness – people willing to form authentic relationships, even with strangers. They start to wonder about those who give so much of their time and resources to help others. They can become drawn to know our God more intimately.

Years ago, my husband and I ran a drop-in center on the beach in Ventura, called Horizon House, sponsored by a coalition of local churches. We ministered to the many young people who were roaming the country in the 1970s, many of them kicked out of their home by their parents when they turned 17 or 18. Some were drug addicts. We fed them, let them use the showers, provided support, took some home with us at times. We did not make them listen to a sermon or an "come to Jesus" talk. But almost all of them would ask: why are you doing this? I then we could share with them of Jesus' love and our faith in him.

When we are rooted in God's grace, we witness and model and reach out, confident that our God will reach out through us, in spite of our being "cracked vessels," in spite of being ordinary and flawed.

3. Welcoming All

First Presbyterian Church of Upland is…. dedicated to…
authentic relationships, generous hospitality, and compassionate service.

I love the stress you have placed on hospitality and service, "generous hospitality," "compassionate service." Jesus stressed many times the importance of welcoming and helping those in need. He begins by reminding us to "love our neighbor as ourself." And then he points out that this neighbor may be somewhat we have taught to despise and hate, such as Samaritans and tax collectors. Instead, he offered them hospitality. He sat at table and shared meals with them.

Is part of your faith journey the experience of this kind of hospitality and generosity? Every Sunday, the same individuals welcome everyone who arrive for worship. What encourages them to do this?

Today we are celebrating the saints of the church that nurtured our faith. Many of them have moved into the life eternal. They are the cloud of witnesses that cheer us on as we run the marathon of a life of faith. Other saints are here on earth with us, some right here in this congregation, as you each support each other. We are community of saints, a community of memory and hope.
Do you believe this!

Let's reaffirm the mission we believe that God is calling us to:

Growing in Christ, Making Him Known, Welcoming All
First Presbyterian Church of Upland is rooted in God's grace, committed to spiritual growth across all generations, and dedicated to making Christ known through faithful witness, authentic relationships, generous hospitality, and compassionate service. Amen