



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “THANK GOD FOR SAINTS”

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Mark 12:28-34

*This sermon was preached by Dr. James Rogers. on Sunday, October 31, 2021  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 12:28-34

Last year on All Saints’ Day, as confirmation class was about to start, I asked Jim Buxton, one of the confirmation mentors, if he was thinking about a particular saint that day. He nodded “yes” and responded, “my dad.” The sound of Jim’s voice as he shared those two words told me that November 1 was an important date on his calendar and his dad had lived a life that had pointed him to Christ. As others joined the Zoom call and the class began, our brief conversation came to an end, but it was certainly not forgotten.

Today we are observing All Saints’ Day during this morning’s worship service. Long ago saints’ days began as a way to celebrate the anniversary of a martyr’s death, but by the year 500 there were so many Christian martyrs that it was hard to celebrate them all, so All Saints’ Day was instituted as an opportunity to honor all the saints.<sup>1</sup>

Now in our Reformed tradition, All Saints’ Day has a different focus. While we certainly give thanks to our ancestors in the faith who long ago led extraordinary lives, today is a day to “give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of believers in this and every age,”<sup>2</sup> to remember those who have entered the church triumphant in the past year, and to pray that we too be counted as God’s faithful.

Staying faithful to God is a challenge faced by God’s people in this and every age. In today’s lectionary reading from the Gospel of Mark, a scribe asks Jesus an important question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” I think this Jewish leader asks this question out of a desire to be faithful to God. You see, there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. That is a lot to keep track of, so this scribe asks Jesus which commandment should be in the forefront of his mind. Jesus responds quoting the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ response, while familiar, directly challenges our self-centeredness and gives us a new understanding of life: first, a love of God with all that is in us and then a love of neighbor as we love ourselves.

Today we celebrate the lives of those, who through their love of God and neighbor, demonstrated what it means to be faithful to God. Our reading from *The Letter to the Hebrews* highlights the

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<sup>1</sup> “All Saints’ Day.” [<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/all-saints-day/>], October 27, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> “All Saints’ Day.” October 27, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:29-31 (New Revised Standard Version).

stories of some of those ancestors in the faith. We are reminded of Moses who by faith led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and through the waters of the Red Sea. We remember Joshua who by faith led the Israelites into the promised land and saw the walls of Jericho fall. We are told once again about Rahab, who by faith assisted the Israelite spies and was saved.

Another saint we remember today is Martin Luther. In fact, today is Reformation Sunday and the 504<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses or grievances against the Roman Catholic Church on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Salvation by faith alone apart from works was Luther's main focus<sup>4</sup>, and he changed the Christian church forever, leading to new ways of thinking about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity. Luther's work was later refined by John Calvin in what came to be known as Reformed theology, which was then brought to Scotland by John Knox.<sup>5</sup>

But we do not have to look back hundreds or thousands of years or look continents away to find saints, people who lived lives of faith, demonstrating their love for God and neighbor, and now rest eternally with God. Which saints are you thinking about today? I am thinking about:

- Van Smith, whose funeral was held on Friday in this sanctuary.
- Dr. Carswell Hughs, who served as our Senior Pastor in the 1980's. Dr. Hughs noticed that there were many in Charleston who needed food and housing, and he led our congregation to help start Crisis Ministries, now known as One80 Place.
- Frank and Loraine Hanckel, who along with others, started our New Beginnings Sunday School Class which led to lifelong Christian friendships and a community of support.
- Nancy Hawk, who used to host youth mission team members for their annual workday fundraiser. She could have hired anyone to clean those gigantic windows at 1 Meeting Street, but she wanted to support our youth and the communities they were partnering with.
- Pam Farrah, who I remember every time I get ready for worship. After I was called to First (Scots) Pam noticed that I was so tall that most standard worship stoles only reached my waist, so she presented me with four beautiful and long stoles, one for each liturgical color. It was an especially meaningful gift, as the stoles had belonged to her son, who had been a Presbyterian minister before he entered the church triumphant.
- Dick Crosby, who devoted his life to education, wanted to celebrate my own academic work, and along with others gave me this robe.
- Mickey Baker, who for years would assist the young adults as they decorated the sanctuary Chrismon tree and made sure that the three important Chrismons, signifying the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were in the correct spot and orientation on the front of the tree.
- Jane Hassell whose early work with the Hands of Christ ministry enabled it to grow and eventually serve up to 5,000 children a year with school uniforms, supplies, and a Bible. She even convinced church leaders to allow a llama to enter our historic sanctuary during

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<sup>4</sup> "Story of the Reformation," *Professing Our Faith: A Confirmation Curriculum* (Congregational Ministries Publishing, Louisville: 2015).

<sup>5</sup> "The History of the Presbyterian Church." [<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/church-history/>], November 4, 2021.

worship and process down the aisle, all to support our church's God's Gift Shop effort to provide for those in need.

- Rusty Stout, who just before his death, finished and hung a beautiful handmade wooden cross in the Lilly Chapel, which hangs behind the pulpit as a visible reminder of the hope of the resurrection.
- Howard Edwards, who would write on the back of his offering envelopes, listing the things that he was thankful for as an expression of gratitude to God.
- Russ Coggeshall, who used to prepare and serve our Wednesday Night Suppers in the old Molly Wier Hall. When a visitor started attending the suppers, but could not afford to pay, Russ always made sure he got enough to eat and greeted him with a smile saying, "We're glad you came."
- Ellen DaVega, who served on the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee that brought my name before this congregation. Already a grandmother, she still chaperoned a middle school youth mission trip to Chattanooga, Tennessee, sleeping on bunk beds in a rustic screened in cabin.
- David Massie, who as a young adult made the decision to be an organ donor; a decision that provided life saving organs to others.

Which saints are you thinking about today?

Echoing the words of the writer of Hebrews, time would fail me to tell of all of the saints who have been on my mind this week. Followers of Christ who through their love of God and neighbor, demonstrated what it means to be faithful to God. I can only imagine all of the saints you are thinking about today: grandmothers and grandfathers, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, children, relatives, church leaders, and friends. We celebrate them for they pointed us to Christ, inspiring us to move past self-centeredness and to love God and neighbor. And they are all part of that "great cloud of witnesses" we hear about in Hebrews, that is cheering us on and encouraging us to keep the faith today, even in the midst of many challenges.

Can't you hear Alice DeWalt saying to our choir, "Keep singing; keep praising God!" Don't you know Elizabeth Anderson is cheering us on? That beloved member of our congregation who didn't let muscular dystrophy stop her from attending over one thousand Porter Gaud school sporting events. I know Paul Hadley is asking about when we will start building another Habitat for Humanity home in our community. Lester Butler is probably bringing refreshments just in case we get hungry or thirsty. I know Fletcher Derrick was cheering on our lay readers last week as they negotiated a very difficult Scripture reading from the *Book of Nehemiah*.

I think you get the picture. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. A cloud that after this past year now includes the following members of First (Scots): Jean Wier, Zoe Newton, Harold Arnold, John Paul, Lester Butler, Chris Smith, Lorraine Hanckel, Gabe Rodrigo, Lynda Lipscomb, Gail Stout, Sara Purcell, Kera Rogers, Anne Coulbourne, Ray Young, and Jeff Wiggins.

About six months after my brief conversation with confirmation mentor Jim Buxton on All Saints' Day, I went to Roper Hospital to make a pastoral visit and found myself in the Julian T. Buxton Jr. Surgical Pavilion named in memory of Jim's dad, the saint Jim had been thinking about on All Saints' Day last year. What Jim did not have time to tell me on that day was that his dad was a much beloved doctor, known for treating people, not patients, who conducted medical missions in Kenya, Siberia, and the Dominican Republic, and was the first doctor to admit a black patient to Roper Hospital, operating on a man who needed an emergency procedure.

"Which commandment is the first of all? You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."<sup>6</sup>

Yes, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Thank God for these saints, who through their example, lived out love of God and neighbor, pointed us to Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, and continue to cheer us on. Which saints are you thinking about today? I hope you will share their names and stories in phone calls with family and friends, during the ride home from worship, or around the table as you enjoy a meal. Pull out a photo album, make a post on Instagram, or create a Tik-Tok. For as we celebrate these Saints, and as we tell these stories, we are reminded of the one they pointed us to, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we are encouraged in our faith.

In today's reading from Mark's gospel, something special happens: the scribe gets it. It is a pretty remarkable thing, considering all of the hostility and blindness of the various religious leaders in this section of Scripture. But the scribe realizes that the love of God and neighbor is much more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. He figures out that the heart is more important than the ritual. And the scribe gets it so much that Jesus tells him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."<sup>7</sup> Thank God for saints. For they got it. They kept the faith, finished their race, and now fully know what it means to be in the kingdom of God. May we too be counted among God's faithful.

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 12:28b-31 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Mark 12:34b (NRSV)