

November 1, All Saints (Ephesians 1:11-23)

## **On All Saints' Day I remember those who tried and failed and tried again.**

by [Kat Banakis](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

The Ephesians text for All Saints' Day makes mention of "love toward all the saints." Depending on your tradition, *saint* could mean many things, everything from canonization to kith and kin to sacrilege, but Ephesians makes clear that there are a lot of them and that they're worth considering.

The church where I serve has saints galore in stone and glass and paint. I think about them sometimes and preach about them when I'm bored of my own voice and stories. More often, though, I think about the saints of the recent past whose prayers, singing, and shuffling footsteps saturate the stones of the building—those *hagioi*, holy ones whose spirits are in the heavenly places all around us as we pray and work and worship each week. The longer I serve, the more of them I learn about.

Our most famous saint was the pastor who served in the early 20th century. Legends about him abound, like this one: that Marlon Brando went to the local elementary school and used to do playground impressions of the pastor's peculiar walk. He'd pop his head out like a turkey and look up at the sky at a side angle, such that he could see the sky but never where he was going.

That pastor intended our church to be the cathedral and had it built as a giant Gothic structure. Sadly for him, the bishop at the time had other ideas. Still, there are more paintings of him than of Jesus around the building, which is probably a good thing so that we don't define Jesus' look. But the pastor's precedence does run the risk of conflating the two men—like maybe Jesus had an aquiline nose, piercing eyes, and a biretta. And one would be forgiven for mistaking one for the other considering that we have a stained-glass triptych featuring the pastor. Right next to it is an oil painting of the pastor presenting a miniature version of the church building to the mother and child. I like to think that they were pleased with our time-

bending gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There's an engraving on the side wall for his daughter, who died in the influenza epidemic along with another child in the church. We talked about her and others a lot when our most recent pandemic began. I'm told his marriage never did recover from that loss.

He left his successor with incredible financial debt on the building. He looked aside when Chicago burned in riots and hate crimes during the Red Summer of 1919. A young Black boy had floated into the waters of a customarily White beach on Lake Michigan and was stoned to death by White people on the shore. One of the purported White instigators of the riots went on to become mayor. Police made just a few arrests, my great-grandfather included.

This pastor grew our local church and helped found the World Council of Churches. He's buried in our basement. He was one of our saints and a person.

There are more recent saints I think of, too, like the woman I buried, having met her only briefly before. She used to be part of a group of four faithful firebrands in the congregation who prayed each other through a husband coming out of the closet, a child with severe mental illness who died young, plenty of alcoholism, the congregation devolving into rancor and factionalism for a time over things that now seem uninteresting but at the time absorbed years' worth of prayers, money, fury, and energy.

Or I walk past our stage in the fellowship hall, which we'll turn into something else soon enough, and think of all the children's musicals that once took place there—learning lines and poise and singing off-key right alongside the story of Daniel and the lion's den or some such tale.

These are the saints I think of when I baptize people on All Saints' Day—those who have come before us and tried and failed and tried again to live for the praise of Christ's glory so that we might live. I baptize them into a river of saints whose lives and oxygen are all around us in the building all the time, part of our history and inheritance, and I will with all my power that this new Christian will know that they are surrounded by all the saints of time immemorial, cheering them on in their life in Christ.