

[Revelation 7:9-17](#)
[Psalm 34:1-10, 22](#)
[1 John 3:1-3](#)
[Matthew 5:1-12](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON ALL HALLOWS' SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS' CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠

In an ambush in Iraq in 2006, Navy Seal Michael Monsoor put his helmet on an exploding enemy grenade and surrounded it with his body and saved his comrades---an act of love of heroic proportion.

In May of this year during the big earthquake in Sichuan, China, the 9-year-old hall monitor Lin Hao, after freeing himself from the rubbles of his school, went back twice to save his fellow classmates---an act of love of heroic proportion.

During the the Second World War, Catholic priest, Father Maximillian Kolbe, offered himself as a substitute for a man who was chosen to die by starvation by the Nazis---an act of love of heroic proportion.

A saint is someone who lives a life of love of heroic proportion. **A saint is someone who loves with abandon.** 'Saints,' our Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori reminds us, "come in all shapes, ages, colors, and theological stripes." This is particularly true because love transcends all boundaries of human conventions. The Catechism of the Episcopal Church has this question: What is the nature of God revealed in Jesus? And the answer is: God is love. And you may say, that sounds good. But what does it really mean?

C. S. Lewis, in his book *Four Loves*, explores the meaning of love by reflecting on four Greek words of love:

στοργη (storge), or fondness between family members or individuals who found themselves by chance;

φιλια (philia), or friendship which is a strong bond between people who share a common interest;

έρως (eros), is love in the "sense of being in love" independent of any pleasure that may result from it;

αγαπη (agape), or charity is the unconditional love toward one's neighbors independent of reciprocation or any lovable qualities that the beloved possesses.

If we follow Lewis' reflection and interpretation, αγαπη (agape) is obviously the most free, most liberating, most life-giving form of love there is. Imagine you possess a love for humankind that is independent of others' liking or not. Imagine you can live a life of love of heroic proportion regardless of the circumstances around you.

When your love for someone does not require your need to be affirmed and reciprocated, you put yourself in alignment with God, who is love in the highest and deepest sense of the word.

Saints are those who have attained this ideal of love. They may not always be agreeable or pleasant. Think of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the prophets who had to get their messages across through tirades. They may not always have lived a “saintly” life as we tend to judge. St. Mary of Egypt was a prostitute whose life was transformed by her knowledge of Christ. St. Augustine of Hippo indulged himself in fleshly desires before his conversion to Christ.

And our church calendar does not have enough room to give each saint a specific day every year. That’s why we celebrate them all today, some well-known, some not so well-known, and some known only to God. Our saints are people who are just like you and me, but who by God’s grace, managed to exemplify the meaning of ἀγάπη in the most critical, most testing moments of their lives. Our saints are people who live the Beatitudes---the true blessedness taught by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

You may still say, “that’s all fine and good, but God has given each of us different gifts. I’m just not one called to love so freely. I’m not called to sainthood.” Let me offer you a different perspective, then. Do you find yourself getting emotionally charged up by certain things that other people do or say? You just can’t imagine why the whole world can’t be just like you. I know of priests who can’t understand why anyone would want to be anything but Episcopalian. Or have you ever been brooding over past injuries and insults? People may have said something to you that seemed small, but unkind nonetheless. You let it go. But later when you revisit it, it becomes bigger and bigger. It makes your blood boil. Have you ever felt unappreciated, unloved? Now, these situations have something to do with our ability to love. We feel bad in these situations because we naturally are looking for reciprocity before we extend our love. We feel unappreciated and unloved at times because subconsciously we place our self-worth on the approval of others.

To get ourselves out of that situation, think positively, infuse yourselves with good and kind thoughts, love your friends and enemies, as Jesus exhorts us to do. When we don’t hold grudges against anyone, when we forgive others as God forgives us, we free ourselves of spiritually unhealthy feelings.

Brothers and sisters, while we may not be able to fix all the problems of the world, we can make it a better world by modeling the love of God, the unconditional love that God has so freely given us in Jesus Christ. Do not let the imperfections and sins of the world stop you from being the “lover” that you are. A saint is someone who is in sync with the unconditional love of God. A saint is someone who truly loves one’s neighbors without exceptions. Or properly speaking, a saint in his or her “saintly” moment is someone who can transcend all else and extend the energies of God’s love to all.

The energies of God are central to the theology of the early Church Fathers. They teach that God’s essence (ousia) is distinct from his energies (energeia) or activities in the world. It’s the energies of God that allow us to experience the Divine. It follows that since God is love, the energies of God are the energies of Love. When we experience unconditional love, ἀγάπη, we experience God. And Saints are people who harvest the energies of love and fill our world with hope.

Today, we will celebrate 4 baptisms. Gracie, Tommy, Kaylee, and Emilee will be baptized and marked by the Holy Spirit as Christ’s own forever. Together with them, as beloved children of God, we will continue our pilgrimage to sainthood all the days of our lives. Love one another. Let the love of the saints march into your hearts.

Love with abandon.

Amen.