

I want to tell you about my friend Bill Tilley.

Bill died recently and we hadn't been in touch in quite some time and so I was saddened to learn that he had entered his final decline with COPD and I hadn't known about it.

I sat next to Bill when we both sang in the choir at the Philadelphia Presbyterian Church in Mint Hill, NC, the church where I grew up. He used to get supremely tickled every time we sang the hymn line, "Let angels prostrate fall," and quip, "That sounds like a painful condition. I didn't know that part could fall." Our pastor, Mr. Kerr, generally referred to him as "the Tilley Timer" because he had the capacity to mutely communicate when the minute hand had passed noon. Some of you have that capacity too, I've noticed.

Bill was also the elder appointed to be my liaison to the Session of the church when I was a candidate for ministry and delivered the charge at my ordination.

When I tick back over the people in my life who have been there at significant times or taught me significant lessons, Bill is in the gallery.

Now you all don't know Bill. You only know him as I've described him, quirky humor and all. But I wonder, maybe you know someone like him?

Perhaps there is someone – perhaps many people – who occupy some special place in your life. Perhaps there was a Sunday School teacher, or an elder, or a minister who, in living their lives, made an indelible impression on yours?

A friend of mine once referred to these folks as "balcony people" meaning that these are the folks in the galleries, cheering you on as you make your way through life, sometimes on a high, and sometimes just barely muddling through.

A lot of life can just feel like muddling though, can't it? I know there are highs, certainly I've felt them, but isn't it more often, not so much the opposite, as it is mundane? It's hard to feel like you're living a really glorified, exalted existence when you're throwing the dog in the tub because whatever he rolled in smells like it can melt the paint. When you're gagging and bathing the dog, it is hard to feel you are up to something particularly holy.

That example is ripped from my real life, but I'm sure you can fill in with similar stories. Changing diapers, feeding children, negotiating with the nursing home, calling the school, going to the vet, going to the orthodontist, going to work, working late, filing an extension, paying the bills... on and on and on it goes.

I know we declare every time we proclaim the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the communion of the saints, but if we're going on the everyday, sometimes it feels more like we ought to be proclaiming that we believe in the communion of the chumps.

And yet we do claim just that – that we believe in the communion of the saints.

And we know – because I've said it before – that we're not talking about haloed dead guys munching on bite-sized bread and shot glasses of grape juice – we are talking about something much, much more profound than that – we are talking of the fellowship of everyone whom the Lord our God has called.

You know that's the language of baptism, "the promise is for, you, for your children, for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God has called."

Maybe you don't feel like a saint?

I don't most days.

But our reformed tradition unabashedly states *simil iustus et peccator*; we are simultaneously sinners and saints.

I'm not a hundred percent certain which part of that statement is harder to stomach – that we're sinners or that we're saints.

But on days such as today, as we remember All Saints', we remember that the body of the faithful is made up of very ordinary people – sinners of God's own redeeming – whom Christ has made to be saints, markers of the kingdom of God among us.

In our baptism, we are called to swell those crowds. We are called to become the balcony people who live the covenant life and in our living serve as the saints who help others in their living.

Preachers have been known to get a hold of a metaphor or turn of phrase and ride it until the horse is dead (see, I just did it) and one that became a commonplace a while back was that Christianity is only ever a generation away from extinction.

For years preachers riffed on that theme, expanding and expounding on it to marshal their congregations into compliant action for whatever the task at hand was. Do you need Sunday school teachers? Well Christianity is only ever a generation away from extinction... Need volunteers for a workday at the church? Well, you know, Christianity is only ever a generation away from extinction.

It was a really great rallying cry – that's why we preachers did it – and then one day we woke up to a staggering realization: *it was true*.

It is true that the church can no longer assume that our pews will fill, though I'm grateful ours do. It is true that the church can no longer assume that our members will give, though I'm grateful ours do – I'm so proud of our Session and Diaconate for their giving

that I can hardly contain it. It was suddenly true that churches were no longer an assumed part of daily life, but rather an oddity that many people look upon with bemused bewilderment wondering just what exactly it is that draws people here.

There is no question but that people have their own reasons, often plenteous, why they could just as soon do without church.

It puts me in mind of an old G.K. Chesterton quote, ““The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

There is no question but that the life of faith into which we are baptized, the covenant in which we are included, is one that may leave us at times feeling at odds with the easy way.

But at the same time, there is something of inestimable value in the work of the communion of the saints.

There is something of inestimable value in lessons that are passed down from generation to generation of the good news of the Gospel – the good news that we are made in God’s own image and that when we blur that image, when we are less than what God made us to be, in Christ Jesus we are redeemed.

No, we may not feel like saints all of the time, or even much of the time, but we’re God’s good creations, made for a purpose, entrusted with a message.

We may not always feel that way, but it remains, nonetheless.

A friend of mine is married to a saint. I know I’m making the case that we’re all saints of the Lord today, but this guy is a real, live saint. People adore him. He teaches third grade Sunday school and has for close to thirty years. When he retired from work, he

found ways to fill his extra time doing good deeds in the community. He tutors. He volunteers at a retirement home. He is good man.

His wife was telling me that she eventually tired of hearing about his extraordinary good deeds one day, and in a fit of exasperation said to him, “Phil, do you have any idea what it is like being married to a saint?”

“No,” he replied.

I expect that most of us feel like his wife most of the time – we may know that sainthood is what is called for but something less is what emerges.

But if we are saints – and if the sharing of the good news is our calling, what sort of covenant life are we supposed to live so that we’re faithful to our calling?

There’s more than one answer to these questions, but I take as instructive our lessons for today, from the Psalmist and the Revelation.

The earth is the Lord’s, declares the Psalmist, and all that is in it.

In the covenant life we live as though we know that everything about this life – from our birth to our death and everything in between – happens under the watchful, loving eye of God.

That’s not to say that God is ordering our lives and we have no free will – I know that’s the struggle a lot of people have with the idea of God’s sovereignty – but that nothing takes God by surprise.

I love the way the late William Sloane Coffin put it, “God gives maximum support and minimum control.”

Everything that is happening in this world is happening under God’s watchful eye.

Indeed, when the storms rage, as we all know they will, when devastation wreaks its way across the landscape, take comfort in the knowledge that we are not outside of God's abiding care.

I know that the knowledge of God's goodness and God's mercy is easy enough to remember when all is well. When we face a calm sea and hear the pounding of regular surf, it is easy to marvel in the goodness of the Lord.

But sometimes the storms rage and the surf surges. And then the words of the Psalmist, "the Earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," even with all their promise may not seem enough.

Then, in the living of our covenant life with God, we remember that not only is the Earth the Lord's, the world to come is as well.

That is the message of that poetic passage of Revelation that we read this morning, about a new heaven and a new earth where mourning, and crying and pain are no more is also the good news of the Gospel.

We live our covenant lives in the knowledge that God has made all that we see and it, and we, belong to God.

And likewise we know that when we come to the end of our days, whether they are many or far too few, that the world that is to come belongs to God as well.

If we have any knowledge of God's goodness and mercy in our lives, it is because someone told us.

I could list the saints who have shaped me – and later we will remember the names of those gone from us since our last All Saints' day. I know the names, living and dead, of the saints who have shaped me, names that mean a very great deal to me.

And I wonder if what it means to be a saint, to live the covenant life wherein we are faithful to God and a blessing to each other, and I wonder sometimes whether it isn't any more simple than remembering that God is with us, all the time, *all the time*. In life and in death, God is with us. I wonder if it isn't as simple as remembering that and helping others to know it too.

A story is told of when Fred Rogers of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," received a Lifetime Achievement Emmy award in 1998. In accepting the award, he asked the celebrity audience to take ten seconds and to think about people who had loved them into being and helped them become who they are. The story goes that within seconds, weeping and sobs could be heard throughout the audience. Then Mr. Rogers said, "May God be with you," and sat down.

A colleague later remarked that he didn't say, "God bless you," because he knew that the people were already blessed by God. Instead, he wanted them to know that God is with them.

And so God is. God is with us, in this world and in the life to come.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.