Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-9, Revelation 21:1-6a, John 11:32-44

You may have seen this, online or on television. A large firefighter – decked out in yellow safety gear, his face-shield tilted back over his head – is holding a limp kitten in one enormous hand. He places an oxygen mask on the kitten that covers the little animal’s entire body. The firefighter begins to massage the kitten’s chest with his giant thumbs. Nothing happens. Patiently, he keeps rubbing, gently, gently. Once an enormity of time has passed there is the barest shudder from the animal. And then a tensing of the body. And then, a cough. And we know the kitten is alive. As the video ends the tiny creature is wide awake – a little dopey – but breathing on its own and fully alive.

I love All Saints Sunday, which is today. Actually, I love the whole month of November. It begins with All Saints and tapers off with Thanksgiving. It begins by remembering all who have gone before us and who have helped make us who we are. And then it ends, appropriately, in gratitude.

That firefighter will never be canonized as a saint. It doesn’t matter: he is one to me. What he did was captured on video for others to see but much more elusive are the heroic acts that go on every day, largely unseen.

Like the young father who holds down a full-time job and goes to school part-time, or even full-time, to provide a better future for his family. Or the surgeon who’s on her feet from dark in the morning until often dark at night working with an exhaustive level of concentration. Then there’s the ones who make these others – and us, too – possible: teachers. What unshakeable dedication teachers have!

There’s the couple who, long after their children are grown, must unexpectedly take on the care of a grand-child or grand-children. What was meant to be a leisure-filled retirement must now be put aside. Money saved for things they had denied themselves while their kids were growing up must now support another generation of family. And they are older; with less energy; and possibly without the good health they enjoyed when they were young parents.

I spoke with a therapist once who said she often found herself speechless with wonder at her clients. She marveled at the common nobility of people in her care; of amazing levels of sacrifice and determination that they absolutely took for granted. “How did you do that?” she would ask. “How did you drive hundreds of miles every weekend for years to visit your mother in a nursing home? How did you save enough money on minimum wage to put three kids through college? How did you do it?”

She said none of them had a good answer. I don’t think saints ever do. They would sort of shrug and shake their heads and mumble something like: “You do what you have to do. You do what you can.”

In one way these people are extraordinary: virtuous; self-sacrificing; noble. Yet in another way they are common; undistinguished; even ordinary. Not one of them will ever be recognized as a saint of the church. It doesn’t matter, because they are saints of God. My definition of a saint is anyone who causes others to feel that God is madly, desperately, tenderly in love with us, whether they are recognized officially or not.

Where they are recognized is in our hearts. We alone know the kinds of sacrifices others have made for us – especially our parents – the kinds of hopes and dreams they nurtured for us. We may be less aware of the hopes and dreams nurtured for us by prior generations. Those who could only dream that someday there would be free public education for all children; that someday women could vote; that somewhere people could practice their own religion without fear. Most of those who hoped and dreamed – and worked in minor ways to make these things happen – aren’t remembered in history books or church canons. They are remembered in our own hearts.

I do that sort of reflection around All Saints Day, especially where my own family is concerned. I consider the goodness my parents embodied. It’s easy to look back on dear old mom and dad and see all the child-rearing mistakes they made. But what about all those things they got right? And what about the relatively unremarkable ways they went about living their lives that benefitted me?

For example, I never heard either of them utter a racial slur. Never. To the extent that well into adulthood I didn’t know what some common vulgarities even meant. My parents never used profanity. They both had a strong work ethic. They had a strong moral ethic.

Mother hammered into me an ethic that drove me nuts but evidently was being practiced by many others: “Do the right thing.” And she always did. So did my father. It was usually in small ways like writing thank-you notes, paying bills on time, picking up a neighbor’s trash that had blown into our yard without complaint or rancor. Do the right thing.

They never turned away an appeal for money at our front door. They made a monthly donation to our church, even though they didn’t go to church. I did! But I only did because they were willing to take me – put down the Sunday paper, get dressed, and take the kid to church. Dad always gave hitch-hikers a ride: it was a safer time back then. Mom took every kid in the neighborhood to school, and to Girl Scouts and to the swimming pool because no one else would do it. They were very generous with their money while not being particularly well off.

I am very grateful. Unfortunately they both died well before I was mature enough to appreciate all they did and all they were. They died before I could really say thank you. That’s exactly why we have All Saints Day. It’s our opportunity to say thank you now to those we weren’t able to thank then. Because they live on, in a more perfected state; in a resurrected state. This, too, is part of what we acknowledge on All Saints: that life goes on beyond the boundaries of flesh and blood.

In the meantime, it’s our turn to do the right thing. It’s up to us to do whatever we can, like put an oxygen mask on a limp kitten at the scene of a fire. When we do, we show a glimmer of the goodness of God. That’s a saint: one through whom others can feel that God is madly, desperately, tenderly in love with us. Amen.