

Simultaneously Saint and Sinner

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

November 2, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Revelation 7:9-17; I John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's the end of an era. My great Aunt Marian died this past summer. The youngest of 14 children born to my great-grandparents, she was the last surviving member of that family. My mother, my mother's sister, my cousins, all my second cousins, and I, as well, recognize that our link to that generation is gone.

Aunt Marian was in declining health for the past ten years, suffering from Alzheimer's. Her husband, my Uncle Leon, took great care of her, with the assistance of community nurses. Robbed of her memory, she slowly retreated into silence and sleep before death came.

But my family is not robbed of its memory of her. We remember her—well. And just as Trinity Lutheran Church on this day remembers, name by name, those in this congregation who have died since last All Saints Sunday, my Aunt Marian is being remembered and named this morning at St. John's Lutheran Church in Johnsonburg, Pennsylvania.

Aunt Marian was the hostess for our annual Fourth of July picnic. I recall no other location for that big celebration in my extended family except Aunt Marian's backyard. Other than Christmas, it was perhaps the biggest family gathering we had, and quite nearly as fun. It was the picnic where the horseshoe pit was ready and waiting for my great uncles (whose tempers flared, I suppose, as horseshoes were knocked aside in the heady competition.) The badminton net was up, much to my father's delight. (The only trouble being that badminton on Independence Day was the only athletic event my father participated in all year. When every muscle screamed in pain on the Fifth of July, he deeply regretted his actions on the Fourth.) Board games and card games were going at several portable tables. All picnickers were welcome to play; except that children were not allowed at the Tripoly table. (That particular game involved gambling with pennies, and no one wished the children's moral compass to go askew.) We youngsters had fireworks—all day and into the evening. In daylight we lit those little tablets called "snakes" that smoked but didn't spark, and then they would begin to grow and expand in long trails of ash, looking indeed like writhing, wriggling snakes on the sidewalk. Once the sun went down, my second cousin Russell became the designated pyrotechnics professional (although looking back on it now, he was probably the only one foolish enough to light the Roman candles, having to run like crazy out of range.) And naturally there was food to eat. Hot dogs and hamburgers and chips galore. Jello salads and watermelon. Aunt Marian's cottage potatoes were expected to be in an industrial size container so everyone would get their fill. After the first round of food, the kids would swing on swings, the older folks nap in lawn chairs, but no one questioned if you went and grabbed a second plate of food, or even a third.

Once so many of the 14 siblings had died, and second cousins and third cousins had moved away, the Fourth of July picnics went by the wayside. But those wonderful days in Aunt Marian's backyard remain an integral memory of my growing-up years, and they shape my memory of Aunt Marian.

In some ways, I never had opportunity to know Aunt Marian as one adult to another adult. She was at my wedding in 1988, and we caught up with each other after my first child was born, but that was about all. So it was with interest that I listened to my mother's report of Aunt Marian's funeral, which I was not able to attend. Apparently, the pastor of St. John's opened up his funeral sermon with these words: *Today we're burying a saint!*

Which I wouldn't consider to be opening up a can of worms, except that, apparently, a couple second cousins were miffed because **their** mother, my great Aunt Gertie, who had been either 11th or 12th out of those 14 children, had **not** been called a saint at **her** funeral sermon. They weren't necessarily implying Aunt Marian wasn't a saint. They just wanted to make certain Aunt Gertie received the same compliment.

Since I didn't hear what the rest of the funeral sermon entailed, I can only guess and hope how the pastor might have proceeded from that point. My great Aunt Marian was a saint. He was absolutely right about that. But her saintliness was not due to her cottage potatoes, however yummy. Nor was it due to her annually opening her home and yard, her bathroom and kitchen and carport to a huge Fourth of July picnic. To be truthful, I suppose when one is the 14th child in a family, one can also be a sinner—either babied and spoiled rotten by all the older siblings, or left to her own devices because the household is in utter chaos and how can one hand know what the other hand is doing? (*Now, where is that Marian? She's supposed to be hanging the laundry on the line!*)

No, I can't speak to Aunt Marian's particular sins, but I'm sure that whether oldest or youngest or middle child, each of us tends to self-absorption, a curving in on ourselves and away from God and neighbor. We're all sinners. But like my Aunt Marian, we're all saints. And if my second cousins didn't get that, didn't understand that, they must not have been listening when the pastor gave the commendation at the funeral's end. Do you know how we end our funeral services here in the Lutheran Church? We say these words: ***Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant Marian. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.***

See, I'm guessing the pastor meant she was a saint because her great God made her so. Sainthood was not a status achieved by something she did, but a gift from God she received in faith. Long ago, Aunt Marian was baptized in the name of our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What reassurance for her all the days of her life to know the Lord God was constantly at work calling her to him, loving and forgiving her, guiding her along a right path, pouring his Holy Spirit into her (and believe me, her ability to make cottage potatoes was obviously Spirit-given, for they were divine!). From her Baptism on, from her parents' raising her in the faith and teaching that faith to her, from the means of grace she received regularly at St. John's

Lutheran—all those sermons and scripture lessons and communion meals over the years—from these things she **knew** the Lord God had made her one of his children and one of his saints. Marian knew who she was and whose she was. So she placed her trust in this God who promised he would be present with her all the days of her life—even in those last days when it wasn't clear to us she was cognizant of anyone's presence. Ultimately, she placed her trust in this God who declared that when she died, she would join the heavenly throng who would give praise eternally, who would sing "Salvation belongs to our God!", and whose tears God would wipe away forever.

God is at work today wiping away our tears, too. For those who mourn, there is great comfort to be found in our ritual this morning. In our worship here we remember those especially dear to us who have died in this past year. We remember them by lighting a candle and then thanking God for their being his light in our lives, for their being his light in so many dark places where by God's grace they managed to show compassion, give generously, serve willingly. And if we're honest about it, we remember them as simultaneously both sinners redeemed and saints transformed. As are we all. **AMEN.**