

Balcony Seats  
John Wilkinson  
Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill  
November 3, 2019  
Ephesians 1:11-23

In a famous lecture from an earlier era, the well-known Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney used a house as a metaphor for a person. There are different rooms in the house that is you, he said. There is a living room where you welcome guests, a kitchen and dining room for eating, a bedroom where you sleep. There is even a basement where you store your trash. (He didn't say "trash," but you get the point!)

If you step out onto the front lawn of the house that is you, Marney said, you see something you didn't even know was there: a balcony. And on the balcony are people, people who have exerted good and gracious influences in your life. "Walk outside and look up and see who's up there on your balcony looking down at you," he suggested. "Wave to them. They are your saints."

That's what we do today, on this All Saints Sunday – we wave to our saints, our balcony people.

Imagine your balcony, and who would be on it. Imagine yourself waving to them...

Who is there? Your parents, or grandparents? That is certainly the case for me. There are others: coaches who encouraged me, teachers who pushed me. There are ministers who influenced me, just as I presume there are those who influenced you in the directions you headed.

But beyond personal matters, your balcony people, our saints, changed the world for good, on grand scales and in small, simple ways.

A little while back I attended a memorial service in Indianapolis of a dear friend. At the reception, a woman approached me and asked me if I was John Wilkinson. It depends, I replied. She told me who she was. Thank goodness I remembered her after 30 years, an elder of the church where I served as a seminary intern. "My name is Charlotte." I remember Charlotte. I remember her mother, Helen, who raised a large family and served faithfully as a church elder. What I remember most about Helen was her work with a program we ran for young women who became mothers at ages 15 or 16 or 17. Helen would come to the church and take the young women and their babies to the doctor for appointments, or to the store for diapers, or just sit with them and let them know that things would be OK, that there was a community, in the form of this saintly one, who cared for them, who would not judge but who would support. Helen's name may not be on a plaque on a wall somewhere, but she is on my balcony because of her humility and faithful service.

We remember them, wave to them, rely on them, lean into them.

We equate the word "saint" with holiness. Let's not lose that connotation; but let's rethink the term, holy. It's not so much a person who works miracles, performs dramatic healings, or is somehow holier

than the rest of us. That is why I love All Saints Day so much, a fitting reminder that in God's commonwealth, none are more special than any other, nor more holy. All are gifted. All saints. Including each of us, and including those we might never know, even those we might never suspect. All saints.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, the Apostle Paul writes of the "inheritance" we have obtained in Jesus. The word denotes a portion, finances or property. This, however, is an inheritance of faith, the promises of the Spirit. Paul tells his Ephesian friends that he has heard about them – their love toward all the saints. The word means sacred or holy, yes, but the assertion is that saints are not set apart, but amongst us, ARE us, within, not beyond, the community itself. That is to say, if you look to your right and left, in front of you and behind you, you will find the saints. And because we have all received this gracious inheritance, hope, faith, we love each other, care for each other, honor each other, remember each other.

If we are fully to embrace the vision of all saints, if we are fully to receive this inheritance, our understanding of sainthood can be limited in no way.

Friday evening, as the Souls Shot exhibition opened (and you must see it, and immerse yourself in it), a woman beckoned me. I want you to see this portrait of my son, she said, warmly. We chatted a bit as she told me his story, a young man dead too soon, tragically, needlessly. It is heartbreaking and heart wrenching, but it is, also, strangely, and strongly, hopeful. She understood better than I ever could that her son was a saint, that he was resting in peace – "*requiescat in pace*" – and that he was also resting in power, that the inheritance we have received from him is a commitment, and a recommitment, to end the epidemic of gun violence. His name is Markeish Johnson and he now occupies a seat in my balcony, along with Helen, along with the names we will remember in just a few moments who had meaning in our lives and in the life of this community of faith.

We will remember. That's the first thing we do. Remember and give thanks. Even in the face of mourning we remember with gratitude. Then we will take stock of that inheritance, and claim again how those saints continue to matter in our lives, how we are stewards of their inheritance for a season and then pass it on – our gifts, our commitments, our faith – to people who will come after us, including a future version of this congregation that we can only imagine now.

Yours will be yours and mine will be mine, balcony people, the saints. Some are gone too sadly. Some are gone too soon. Some lived long and fully and well. We miss them all.

And yet...We walk out on the front yard and there they are, our balcony people. We wave to them. We sing, with joy, and perhaps with a tear in our eye. "O blessed communion, fellowship divine. We feebly struggle; they in glory shine. Yet all are one in Thee, for all are thine. Alleluia. Alleluia" Amen.