

November 7 All Saints

“I know, I know!” Little Johnny waved his hand in the Sunday school class. The teacher had just asked the children, “What is a saint?”

“I know, I know,” said Johnny: “a saint is someone light shines through!”

A saint is someone light shines through. Little Johnny was thinking of the stained-glass windows he had seen in his church. He had noticed that the pictures of people called saints all had light coming through them. There were St Mary and St Peter and so on, and all of them had light shining through them, which is why he could see them. Johnny had figured this out for himself, and that’s why he was so eager to share his knowledge.

Well I don’t know if this is a true story, but it should be, because in it little Johnny gives us the best definition of saintliness that I know. Certainly for stained-glass saints, but also for real ones. *Saints are those whom light shines through.* The more that a person is a channel for God’s compassion and wisdom and love, the more likely that eventually someone will say of them, “My goodness, what a saint!” In the presence of some people, you just know that a Power greater than them is coming through. You feel it. And today, All Saints Sunday, is when we give thanks to God for the whole lot of them.

The best way to do this is just to tell some of their stories. There have been countless numbers through whom the presence of God has especially

shone. We can't tell all their stories, so a few will have to do. I will stop at four examples, though one could go on and on, if time permitted.

One of the most remarkable people I ever met was a woman named Esther Burgess. Esther and her husband, John Burgess, were members of a parish I served a few years back. They were both elderly when I met them, and Esther clearly had some dementia. But they were both still powerhouses of personality. John Burgess had been the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, a very large and wealthy diocese. But his importance was even greater than that. John Burgess was the first African-American ever elected to be Bishop of any diocese, so he was important in the history of the whole American Church. It was a great honor for me to be his parish priest in his final years. But as I got to know John and Esther, I slowly learned how much they had suffered. Being the first Black person to do anything makes you a target. Even if you are a powerful Episcopal bishop, you get threats and slights that made my blood run cold as I learned about them. The same is true for the Bishop's wife. I'm sure I never learned the half of it.

Anyway, one day I asked Esther, "Esther, what is your secret? How have you risen above it all and continued to be a person of faith and hope?" "Well, Mr O'Flynn," she said – Esther always called me Mr O'Flynn, "you have to pray for your enemies. There is no other way."

In that moment the light dawned for me. Esther had indeed just revealed her whole secret. She meant it literally. She had been praying by name for those who wished to do her harm, and she had done so for years. This is

how forgiveness begins, I realized. It begins in prayer, and then it influences all of a person's life. That was the that light shone through Esther Burgess.

Here is the story of another person through whom light shone. Her name was Edith Cavell, and she was a British nurse. Edith Cavell crossed the English Channel in 1912 to help start a nursing school in Belgium. She was still in Belgium when World War I broke out. Belgium quickly fell under German control. Nurse Cavell became part of a scheme to help trapped British soldiers escape. Some 200 soldiers managed to escape and return to England. Cavell was arrested by the German military for her part in the scheme. She went on trial, and was convicted, and then was executed by firing squad, despite an international outcry against the very idea of executing a nurse. What made Cavell famous however, was not just her wartime activities, or even her brutal fate. The reason she is remembered still, is the remarkable spiritual state to which she came during her imprisonment.

Edith Cavell never complained about her death sentence. She agreed that actually, it was fair. She had been giving aid and comfort to Germany's enemies. It was wartime—what were the Germans supposed to do? But she came to see it all in a larger perspective. An Anglican chaplain was permitted to bring her communion on the night before she died. She told him, “I am thankful to have had these ten weeks of quiet to get ready. Now I have had them and have been kindly treated here. I expected my sentence and I believe it was just. Standing as I do in view of God and

Eternity, I realize that patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.”

These are the words that made Edith Cavell famous. They were later inscribed on a statue set up in her honor in London. “Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.” The light of God still shines through these words.

Here is a third story, proving you don’t have to be famous to be a real saint. In fact this story is about someone so obscure I don’t even remember his name. I learned about him when I saw an icon of this man on the wall of an American missionary I once visited. Since I didn’t recognize him I asked my hostess who he was. She lit up with a smile.

She told me that this saintly man was new to her too, and she had found about him by a coincidence. He was a completely ordinary person. He was Russian. He was not a priest or a monk or anything like that. No one ever said of him, “Goodness, what a saint.” Until, that is, during his final illness. While living in a rest home visitors began to notice a kind of glow about him. It was not anything he said or did. It was just a very peaceful presence. Then, after he died, someone took his sweater home as a kind of keepsake. The sweater turned out to have a kind of glow too, and of course—you have to prepare for this sort of thing when you start investigating saints— healings were associated with that sweater. In time, the people who knew that man came to understand that hidden beneath his obscure exterior, lay a deep well of faith and love and hope. What made him famous, and a fit subject for religious art to memorialize, is that no one

suspected it. He was 100% ordinary, but in the end, the light of God had to shine out. That light was still shining, in the enthusiasm of the woman on whose wall I saw that icon. The light shed by that obscure man increased her faith every day also. It encouraged her to believe that she too could grow in faith, and hope and love, whether or not anyone else ever noticed.

OK, time for one more. There are so many! How can we choose? Let me tell you about David Oakerhater.

Born in the 1840s in [Indian Territory](#) (later the [U.S. state](#) of [Oklahoma](#)) to Cheyenne parents Sleeping Wolf (father), and *Wah Nach* (mother), Oakerhater was the second of three boys. His childhood name was *Noksowist* ("Bear Going Straight"), and he was raised as a traditional Cheyenne. His older brother was Little Medicine, and his younger brother was Wolf Tongue.^[1]

Oakerhater is believed by some to have been the youngest man to complete the [sun dance](#) ritual (his Cheyenne name, *Okuh hatuh*, means "sun dancer").^[2] He participated in his first war party ([military raid](#)) at age 14 against the [Otoe](#) and [Missouri tribes](#),^[1] and was initiated into his tribe's "Bowstring Society" (one of five military societies).^[1]

In the 1870's Oakerhater fought the US cavalry. He was the leader of his war party. He was captured however, and imprisoned in Florida. There he became familiar with Christianity and was eventually sponsored by a church in upstate New York to come there. He studied, was baptized and confirmed. He picked the Biblical name David for his baptism, while the

Cheyenne words *Okuh hatuh* turned into Oakerhater. He was ordained a Deacon in the Episcopal Church. Later he went to Oklahoma again, and served as a very effective and much loved missionary to Native populations until his death in 1930. He is the first Native person to have been honored by the Episcopal Church with his own feast day, September 1.

I picked David Oakerhater out so many other possibilities because that little church where he lived in upstate New York was quite close to where I lived up to 2015. I worshipped in it many times. There is no longer a congregation there, but the diocese of Central New York maintains the building out of respect for Oakerhater. Empty though the building is, there is nevertheless still a feeling of presence. There is a sweetness about the place, and the cemetery behind it, where Oakerhater's wife and child are buried. The sweetness is quite noticeable, at least to me. Something of God's light shines through it still.

OK—there are zillions more examples of people through whom God's light has shined. What about us? Can God's light shine through us? Of course. It already does. We are made in the image of God. To some extent we can't help but be beacons of God's presence on earth. Every time we use our brains or our hearts as God intended, some of God's light goes forth. If we just don't get in the way, it happens.

So it is not about us "being good." "Being good" is not what sainthood is about. It is about letting God be God, and us being the kind of humans we were created to be. It's about putting ourselves in places where we can do the most good, and asking for God's help in doing it. It's definitely

something we can facilitate. In the end however, it is God's doing if God's light shines through us. That is as it should be. Whatever light we shed, it is to God's glory. Thanks be to God then, that so many have shone forth with so much Christ-like love, and faith, and hope. Let us praise these famous ones, and rejoice in our communion and fellowship with them.