

MAECEL AND DELBERT
Rev. Gregory Flint
November 1, 2009 (All Saints)
From Ruth 1

For many children Halloween is one of their favorite days of the year. Depending on how the costume making and trick-or-treating went last night, parents may feel differently.

Historically, Halloween – a shortened form of All Hallows Eve – was the night to prepare for an important feast day in the church – All Saints Day. And All Saints was the day to honor not the big-name, miracle-working saints, but the ordinary, bread-and-butter saints – those many folk who lived and died loving the church and keeping the faith.

Then, the popular culture got hold of the dead saints part of it and made it about ghosts and spookiness and the trick-or-treating of children dressed like their favorite cartoon superhero.

So in recent years we've tried here to recover the meaning of All Saints Day, lifting up in sacred remembrance the ordinary saints who kept the faith here and died, but whose legacy hallow the very walls of this church house.

For when the costumes are packed away and the sugar high has worn off today, it does matter to know who our spiritual ancestors are here, so that we can remind our children and ourselves that we all carry that saintly spark.

And this year, All Saints has particular poignancy for us because this summer we lost 15 saints of the church. Never before have we had as many deaths in such a short period. In one summer we virtually lost a generation of those who kept the faith here, some for more than 60 years.

And it will be a long time before we can get used to not seeing them here. They were the pillars, the saints who modeled the faith for us and who reminded us of the value of our own witness and faith keeping....

Delbert and Maecel Edwards, humble saints that they were, would not want to be singled out. But I lift them up this morning as representative of that generation of church builders and wise elders who worshiped and served and loved this congregation. And though Maecel died more than a decade ago, Delbert was among the 15 whose deaths this summer we still mourn.

So if you didn't know them, let me tell you about Delbert and Maecel. And if you did know them and love them too, join me in remembering on this All Saints Sunday....

Delbert Edwards – Del – was a master fly fisherman. I'm pretty much a novice, but what I know about fly fishing I learned from Del. And I do know that fishing is less about catching fish than about who you fish with. If you fish with the right people, it's impossible to have a bad day fishing.

Del was the right person to fish with. Any day fishing with Del was a good day. Not just because you learned about fishing watching him. More importantly, you watched a man who had figured out life: how to live simply yet fully; at peace with what was and is, what couldn't be and will yet be.

I can see him in my mind's eye – deftly maneuvering his drift boat through the fast water of the McKenzie while drinking a cup of coffee, eating a sandwich Maecel had made, and making the prettiest roll caste with a dry fly he'd tied himself.

I swear Del could caste a tiny #16 dry fly into a coffee cup at 40 feet against the wind. And he did it so effortlessly, in the same understated graceful way he lived.

And as he's making another picture-perfect caste, he's talking about the geology and hydraulics, the botany and eco-history along the river he knew so well and loved. And he's not lecturing or trying to impress you with how much he knows. Rather, it's the quiet, unassuming talk of a man who was never bored or uninterested.

If part of what it means to be a saint is to be fully present and mindful, to receive each day gratefully as a miracle and gift of God...then Del was a saint, with a fly rod in his hand, or with young people as a high school teacher, or here in this church....

Delbert met Maecel while they were both teaching school. And they became partners in marriage and soul mates. And they loved this church – the grace formed relationships, the beauty of a people at worship, the justice done, the healing and new beginnings. There were few if any volunteer tasks in this place that Del and Maecel had not done.

I will never forget Maecel going with me one day to visit a church member in a care center for persons with Alzheimer's. Maecel already visited several of our homebound members. And she was with me this day because she was willing to befriend one more.

And the person we went to see was having a very bad day. More disoriented than usual, terrified by this terrible loss of memory, this woman was agitated beyond the nurses' ability to calm her. She was yelling and wailing. Her frail little body literally shook.

And Maecel knelt on the floor in front of this terrified soul, put her hands gently on the woman's knees, looked into her eyes, and in that warm, wonderful, unique voice of hers, said: "Dear, I don't want you to be afraid."

And the woman just stopped yelling and her body relaxed. Even a hint of a smile began to form through the blur and fear. It was quite astonishing actually. The nurse looked at me and shook her head in wonder. And to this day, every time I read one of the Gospel stories about Jesus calming someone with a demon, I remember the effect Maecel had on this woman struggling with the demons created by Alzheimer's.

But then Maecel just had this comforting, deep peace about her. In her presence the hard edge came off a lot of things. Healing takes many forms, and Maecel was one of the healers in our church.

And in the text for today from Ruth, if the point is how large-heartedness and lived generosity is the spiritual way to inner peace and contentment...then those of us who knew her saw that spiritual way modeled in Maecel Edwards....

Back in the drift boat with Del, he seemed like an expert fisherman to me. Though Del was always quick to point out that he had a great deal more to learn about fishing and about life – that the real joy in both is in the learning not the certitude.

I remember one time Del spotted a big trout – fourteen or fifteen inches – holding in a pool. Del put perfect caste after perfect caste right on the mark in front of the big fish, which just ignored Del's fly. After ten minutes, Del reeled in his line, grinned, and said, "Well another fish smarter than we are."

In this time when so many act as if they know the sole truth and shout out their presumed certitude on talk radio and in town hall meetings, from pulpits and in blogs...we would do well to remember here the wise humility of these everyday saints- Del and Maecel Edwards....

Years ago a person in our church stopped coming because of some misunderstanding with another. And I tried to listen and talk to the one staying away, but I knew my efforts weren't enough.

So I called Maecel. “Oh goodness, I’ll make a visit,” she said. And sure enough the next Sunday the one whose feelings were hurt was back in church. And I knew why. Because Maecel had listened and empathized. But Maecel had then said the time for hurt was past, because in church we forgive one another.

The biblical story of Ruth is about what really matters in life: relationships, caring for one another; forgiveness and mercy; making community; risking love again; allowing God’s grace to break through. Maecel modeled such an everyday faith for us. She is one of our saints....

As wise and clear-sighted as Delbert was, he had an inkling that the surgery he was facing might well be the beginning of the end. He was right. And the night before the surgery in the hospital, having joked with the nurse so she left the room laughing, Del then said to me: “I miss her still, everyday, you know.”

“Yes, Delbert, I know,” I said. “We all know how much you miss your soul mate.” For it was always Del and Maecel...Maecel and Del.

Then he said he’d been thinking about it – this matter of dying – because he had this sense it was getting close. Del said he thought dying was probably like rowing a drift boat – that the trick is not to fight the current, but work with and trust the flow of the river.

And it sounded to me that night like real wisdom – the kind of thoughtful, calm, unassuming, grace-filled wisdom of a humble saint....

So on this All Saints Day, as the Halloween costumes are being put away, maybe it would also be good to tell our children about Maecel and Delbert Edwards, or about some other saints who have made real the presence and love of God in our lives.

For it’s important – isn’t it? – that our children know who their spiritual ancestors are. It is a way of reminding our children of the saintly spark they carry too.

And come to think of it, this All Saints hallowing is a good reminder for us bigger children as well.