On the coasts of Scotland and Ireland there are certain sites that the locals call “thin places”. Thin places are not so named because the altitude is any higher or the air any thinner there. Instead, the sense of “thin place” comes from a perception that the distance between heaven and earth shrinks, and the veil between the two worlds is so “thin” you can sense it.

While on sabbatical in Ireland last summer I experienced one of these “thin places”, St Colman’s Well, in the Burren region on the rugged west coast. St. Colman MacDuagh, a 6th century hermit, lived in the Burren forest, almost in total seclusion. Legend has it that his three dearest companions were a rooster, a mouse, and a fly. The rooster’s crow would wake him early before dawn to apply himself to prayer. The mouse chewed on his ear to wake him if he dozed off while praying, and the fly—the fly was said to mark his place in whatever manuscript he might be reading so he could easily pick up where he left off.

As pilgrims, the day we went to St. Colman’s well, we fasted and walked in silence, single-file, over the limestone paths up the mountain, until we got to Colman’s well. After being asperged (sprinkled) by water from the well, we walked ritually through his chapel and then each climbed up a steep incline and had time in solitude to sit in Colman’s cave. However, it was upon completing those different stations that I had my special experience of that thin place. Seated in silence at the ruin of the chapel, I looked up from my reverie to see a fly on the sleeve of my jacket. Just sitting there, not flitting about. Perhaps, marking for me that I should pay special attention to the privilege of being in this holy place. I can’t tell you how long the fly stayed there because time seemed to stop—at least chronological time. Then at some point I looked down at my feet and saw a swarm of flies, too many to count, just hovering there; linking me with saints I have known and loved and others whom I hope someday to meet.

Today is a day to ponder saints; some who are known widely for their great witness of faith, living and dying heroically; others who are lesser known, but no less dear to us, who modeled what it means to let the light of Christ shine through them so we could experience God’s love, and by their example, aspire to be Christ for others, too. Today is a day when the veil between this life and eternity is very thin. It is a day to remember loved ones who have gone before us into light perpetual and the whole communion of saints who join their praises with ours every time we gather at God’s table to partake of Christ’s holy meal.

Our minds sometimes wander when we rehearse God’s saving acts that culminate in this holy meal, but pay attention today especially to the proper preface in which we pray, “For in the multitude of your saints you have surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses, that we might rejoice in their fellowship, and run with endurance the race that is set before us, and together with them, receive the crown of glory that never fades away.”

The Feast of All Saints declares that we are one with all the faithful, all the people of God, across time and space. As we kneel around this altar this morning, we are joined by those departed whom we will name shortly as we read the Necrology: Stu Andrews, Charlotte Cushing, and Bob Garfield; Joe
LaGuardia, Alice McKinley, and Jim Nesper; Kayleigh Mooney, Jack Severiens, and Don Sharp; Franny Taft and Julie Stanger; they are all with us as well as those saints each of you are recalling privately. Those who touched your life with inspiration, instruction, and love. They are all here with us, along with the saints pictured in glass in the Te Deum window at the rear of St. Martin’s—St. Joan of Arc, Martin of Tours, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and, of course, our patron, St. Paul.

In the gospel we just heard, the Beatitudes, we sometimes mistakenly believe that in order to be blessed by God we have to try harder to be meek, poor, and mournful. However, Nadia Bolz-Weber asks, “What if the Beatitudes aren’t about a list of conditions we should try to meet to be blessed? What if Jesus saying ‘Blessed are the meek’ is not instructive but performative...?” Bolz-Weber writes, “Maybe the sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus’...blessing all the accidental saints in this world, especially those who that world—like ours—didn’t seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.”

I believe the Beatitudes invite us to confess our need for God’s mercy and blessing, admitting that we don’t have it all together, but acknowledging that God can use us, just as we are, to be a sign of hope and love. They also invite us to surrender our wills to God’s; to give up worrying about the future and all the attendant anxieties associated with it. To rest in God’s mercy, knowing that none of the trials of life can separate us from God’s love. Finally, the Beatitudes invite us to be wildly hopeful, trusting that God is more able than we can ever know to bring life out of death.

All Saints Day reminds us that we travel among a great cloud of witnesses. We know by the grace of God that just as those departed were and are held in the love of God, we are, too. Even now, as we give ourselves to the service of God’s kingdom, we are marked by the pattern of Jesus’ life. That pattern is cross shaped and it reminds each of us that as we are marked with his cross we are moving through death to resurrection.

Frederick Buechner put it in these words: “To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews. Maybe more than anything else, to be a saint is to know joy. Not happiness that comes and goes with the moments that occasion it, but joy that is always there like an underground spring, no matter how dark and terrible the night.”

In the mystery of God’s love, we are God’s saints, here and now, joined with saints throughout time who have been caught up in the mystery of love triumphant over death. Surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and those around us, may we be filled with Christ’s spirit and run the race before us with endurance and joy.