

## Sermon for Oct 30, 2016: All Saints Day – “A Different Standard”

All Saint’s Day – 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C – Text: Luke 6:20-36

There was this haunted house on the outskirts of the town which was avoided by all the town folk. The ghost which “lived” there was feared by all. However, an enterprising journalist decided to get the scoop of the day by photographing the ghost. When he entered the house armed with only his camera the ghost descended upon him, clanking chains and so forth. He told the ghost, “I mean no harm, I just want your picture.” The ghost was quite happy at this chance to make the headlines so he posed for a number of pictures. The happy journalist rushed back to his dark room, and began developing the photos. Unfortunately, they turned out to be black and underexposed. So what’s the moral of the story? The spirit was willing, but the flash was weak.

Today is All Saint’ Day and I’ve a question. What do we think of when you hear the word “saint?” If we’re like most people we tend to think of people from the Bible, people like Peter or Paul, or any of the other disciples, or we think of people like St. Francis, St. Augustine, and so forth. You know, saints in the Catholic sense. Those who’ve gone through the canonization process. “Spiritual overachievers” as it were. But in our Reformed tradition we don’t have saints as such, and so we tend not to make too big a deal about All Saints Day. I’ve always thought that this was kind of a shame because it somehow makes the whole idea of sainthood and of the “communion of the saints,” inaccessible to us. But, when you get down to it these great people are only bright examples of something that is very common, and that is a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. A faith that has been stirred to action. So for every “saint” that has garnered attention throughout history there are so many, many, more, both living and dead, who remain not only “un-canonized,” but unrecognized. And sad to say, even anonymous.

So what exactly am I talking about here? What is a saint? Well, the word itself comes from the Latin “Sanctus”, which we translate as “holy” or “consecrated”, and it originally meant simply, “set apart.” It wasn’t until Christianity came into prominence that it began to have the meaning we ascribe to it today. And in the Bible, particularly in Paul’s letters, the term “saint,” is used to describe **all** who believe in Christ, all who strive to live faithfully according to his teachings and his example. It would seem then, that saints are all around us. People who are holy, that is, set apart from the rest of the world. Called to live, because of their faith, by a different standard.

Earlier I mentioned that we tend to think of people in the Bible as saints. But, when you stop and think about it these were normal people, and not necessarily “good” people. I mentioned Peter and Paul. Need I remind you that it was Peter who betrayed Jesus? And that Paul, by his own admission, persecuted Christians? And going back further in the bible what about Moses, a murderer? Or David, a murderer **and** an adulterer, yet described as “a man after God’s own heart.” What are we to make of that? What are we to make of the fact that not only could God use them, God used them in extraordinary ways. Moses was considered the greatest of the prophets and led the ancient Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land. David became the model for the promised messiah, someone who would be one of his descendants. Peter was the rock upon which the Church was built. Paul wrote nearly a third of the New Testament and the greatest church planter in history! It seems to me, then, that if saints are different, which they’re really not, it’s not because of any moral perfection but because of the way in which they ultimately live out their faith. The way in which they **persevere** in their faith constantly seeking to grow in faith and spiritual maturity. They know that it’s not about anything they’ve done, it’s about what God has done and continues to do in their lives. It’s about pointing others to God which is something that we’re all called to do!

So, I wonder...Called as we are to be saints, doesn't it make sense to pause once a year to think about the saints of God and give thanks for them? Especially those who've touched our lives? Doesn't it make sense to consider how we might honor what they've done in light of what Christ has done and calls us to do? As Frederick Buechner, once wrote, "In His holy flirtation with the world, God sometimes drops a pocket handkerchief. "Those handkerchiefs are called saints."

Think for a minute about the saints you know or have known, those who've touched your life. Whose "child-like" faith has been an inspiration. Whose love and witness to Christ's love, awakened something in you. I'm thinking of several people. What about the rest of us? Who are, or who have been, saints to you? At some point today take a minute and think about them. Thank God for them. Those like the ones Jesus calls blessed in Luke's beatitudes. Those whom we believe were, or are, set apart by God. Those who've been made holy because they've encouraged you to live towards your high calling as the children of God. Those, to put that another way, who've encouraged us to be saints.

Now, at this point, we may be thinking: surely you can't mean me? Well, I do mean you, and don't call me Shirley! Actually, I'm quite serious. I say this because we live by a **different** standard. We are **"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. In order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light"**. This is the verse upon which the Reformation understanding of sainthood to include **all** Christians is based, ironically by none other than the aforementioned Peter! As it happens, probably not coincidentally, tomorrow marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. And the guy who started it, Martin Luther (an unlikely candidate in his own right), had this to say about sainthood...He said, "Thus Scripture calls us holy while we are still living here on earth, if we believe. The papists have taken this name away from us. They say: 'We should not be holy; only the saints in heaven are holy.' Therefore, we must get the noble name back. You must be holy. But you must be prepared not to think that you are holy of yourself or on the strength of your merit. No, you must be holy because you have the Word of God, because heaven is yours...And because you have become truly pious and holy through Christ." For Luther it's nothing Christians do that makes us saints, it's what Jesus has already done! Luther went on to say that, "when we have repudiated this foolish and wicked notion about the name 'saints' which we suppose applies only to the saints in heaven and on earth to [those] who perform some sort of spectacular work...Let us now learn from the writings of the apostles that all believers in Christ are saints. They are not called saints because they are without sin or have become saintly through works. On the contrary, they themselves, with all their works, are nothing but condemned sinners. But they became holy through [the holiness] of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is given them by faith and thus becomes their own. This faith is so strong and powerful that it covers and wipes away all sins and shortcomings that remain in flesh and blood." Brothers and sisters this is a different standard! And here's the thing...Our actions, what we do, does not make us saints. It is, instead, God's grace.

Today, we remember the saints who have gone before. We honor their lives, lives of faith, lives lived in response to God's grace while struggling with the same evil and temptation as we do. Let us remember that **we**, too, are all saints. We gather in Jesus' name offering praise and thanksgiving for God's goodness and his gracious gifts fully aware of our sin, acknowledging our need for repentance, re-dedicating our lives to God because, as Thomas Merton wrote: "we can only become saints by facing ourselves, by assuming full responsibility for our lives just as they are with all their limitations and handicaps and submitting ourselves to the purifying and transforming action of the Savior."

A different standard indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.

