

All Saints, Yr. A

November 1, 2020

Revelation 7:9-17, Matthew 5:1-12

It's All Saints Sunday. At the Sunday service, we'll remember all those who have gone before us and we'll picture them as part of that great multitude in the reading from Revelation. Or, if you prefer, we can picture them as standing before the face of God, having fully become those sons and daughters that God intended from the beginning.

I'd like to make the point at the very beginning that when we talk about saints, we're talking about those I just mentioned, who have gone before us. We're also talking about those people that the church holds up publicly for our edification: those who are in the church calendar or in Lesser Feasts and Fasts, or, in the RC church, those who have had miracles attributed to them and who have gone through the arduous process of canonization. But it also includes us, saints in the making. It's easy, in all the distractions of everyday life, to forget that holiness, sanctity, is what we are called to. It's what it means to be a son or daughter of God. We rarely articulate that. I think back to seminary where there was a lot of conversation about being called to the ministry, or to preaching, or to marriage, or to some other kind of service, but I don't think I have ever heard anyone say that they were called to be a saint. It does sound a bit presumptuous, doesn't it? Maybe that's because we realize how far we are from that lofty ideal. But we live and worship in a tradition that talks about the universal call to holiness – that tells us that, ultimately, the only thing that really matters is that we become saints.

That's one of the questions put to us this morning. What would it mean for each of us to become a saint? If we were meeting and singing, we'd undoubtedly be singing, "I Sing a Song of the Saints

of God.” It’s a hymn that celebrates what we could call ordinary saints. Remember it? It tells us that the world is brimming over with all kinds of joyous saints. We can meet them in school, or at sea, in church or on trains, or in shops or at tea – and it tells us that there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be one too.

Thinking about this, I decided that it would help if we looked at a number of ways writers have talked about saints.

One of my favorites is from Frederick Buechner who says:

To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human.... To be a saint is to live not with our hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with our hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. 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 it 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 how terrible the night. To be a saint is... to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full. (*The Magnificent Defeat.*)

Other spiritual writers have their own definitions. See if one of these speaks to you:

Saints are people whose lives prove that Christ is risen.

Saints are people who are grasped and used by God. They can be monks or merchants, tots or teachers. They are diverse but what they have in common is that they love as God loves.

Saints are those who live in the tension that comes from facing in two directions: toward God and toward their fellow humans.

Saints are all those striving to become whole in goodness, truth and love.

One that I find meaningful is from the theologian Paul Tillich who said that a saint is a saint not because he or she is “good” but rather because he is transparent for something greater than himself. That idea of being transparent. It’s been said that Jesus was transparent: that when you looked at him you could see God because he had gotten his own “stuff”, his own ego, his own needs, out of the way. When I first embarked on a serious spiritual journey, I had a Benedictine nun as a spiritual director. One time when we were talking, she said that in the tradition of the desert fathers and mothers, the seeker would ask for a word that they could live by. It was a casual conversation and so, half-jokingly, I said, “OK, Mother, give me a word to live by.” And without missing a beat, she said, “Be transparent.” In that same vein, you may remember me telling you the story about the little girl who had been visiting England and saw a lot of cathedrals. When her Sunday School teacher asked about saints, she said, “I know what they are! They are the people who let in the light.” Back to transparency.

Somehow those people let us see something of God. There’s a story about David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. You’ll remember that Livingstone was a famous missionary in Africa and he had disappeared. Stanley went looking for him and, when he found him after a lengthy search, he uttered that famous line, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” The two men lived together for 3 months and some time after that, when Stanley wrote his memoirs, he said, “Dr. Livingstone made me a Christian and he didn’t even

know he was doing it.” Something about who he was and how he lived “let in the light.”

In this day of polls, it turns out that a couple of people did a poll on what people thought about saints and then wrote a book about their findings. Saints, they said, are people for whom God is real; people who have a deep level of commitment, exceptional compassion, who try to make a difference, who respond to need wherever they see it, who have an abiding joy.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a story? Legend? About 36 people, called the Lamed-Vovs. They are living people who don't think of themselves as saints, but who do such deeds of kindness and compassion that God allows the world to go on because of them.

That's a lot to think and pray about and a lot to respond to. But before we close this morning, I'd like to tie all this to the beatitudes that we heard in the Gospel reading from Matthew. If the first question put to us today is WHO ARE THE SAINTS? The second is WHO ARE THE BLESSED?

A lot has been written about the Beatitudes, about whether they are nice and lofty but ultimately hopeless ideals or if they are something else. I remember reading that Bonhoeffer, when he was writing theology in Germany was of the opinion, along with most other theologians, that they really were just abstract ideas. But when he came to the US and attended a church in Harlem, he saw those ideals being lived out and he changed his mind. Not just ideals, but statements of fact that this is actually the way God's world works – the way it's working even now, the way it will fully work when the Kingdom has come.

If you remember your English grammar, you'll remember the difference between imperative sentences, which are commands,

and indicative sentences, which simply state the way things are. These are also sometimes called declarative sentences. The Beatitudes are indicative or declarative. What they are saying is that those who live humbly now are blessed, those who mourn because of the state of the world with all its suffering are blessed, those who make peace are blessed. Right now. One scholar points out that that beginning word, BLESSED, is best translated as “to find the right road.” So, to tie this to the idea of sainthood, or holiness, as a work in process, a journey that we are all on, we could say that we are on the right road when we are humble and merciful and striving for justice and righteousness.

That’s really what Buechner is saying in his definition of a saint – someone who lives with hands open and outstretched, someone who works and weeps for the suffering of the world, someone who takes hope knowing that God mends and renews, God holds us all in his hands. Someone who knows that he or she is already living in blessedness. Amen.