

Calling All Saints

Sermon 36 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 3, 2019

Luke 6: 20 - 31

In a small town, there were two brothers who, over the course of many years, cheated, swindled, robbed and generally stole from everyone that they ever did business with. The entire town and surrounding community reviled and despised these two brothers as everyone was aware of just how disreputable and dishonest they were. One day, one of the brothers mysteriously died. Although they had never attended church, the one remaining brother went to the local pastor and offered vast sums of money if he would come to the funeral and say the appropriate words, and, a large bonus, if only he would – during the course of the eulogy – refer to his brother as a “Saint.”

The pastor was troubled by the request; however, it was a very poor church and the building desperately needed repairs. The parishioners had heard about the pastor’s dilemma and were curious as to what he would do.

The funeral began, the church was packed, and the pastor started with the usual prayers and followed the rites and traditions as required by the church’s teachings. In closing, after referring to the man in the box, he paused and turned to the remaining brother. He began, “As you all know, the departed was an awful individual who robbed, cheated, swindled, and stole from everyone he ever did business with. However, compared to his brother, he was – “a Saint!”

Sounds like compared to this guy’s brother, all of us might also be considered “saints” as well!

As Baptists, we don’t talk about saints all that much. We don’t participate in the veneration process with our Catholic sisters and brothers. We don’t pray to or through our ancestors, like practitioners of other faith traditions. We don’t adorn our mantles with photos of our grandparents and great grandparents, lining our streets with marigold petals hoping that our family saints might return from the other side and guide us in the living of our days. We don’t talk about saints much. Unless of course we are referring to the New Orleans Saints – who are having a fantastic season, by the way.

For Baptists, like us, the only time we even think about saints is this one Sunday of the year, All Saints’ Sunday, when we gather in our pews, we sing hymn number 767, and we remember those who, in the last year, have gone on to be with God in their eternal resting place.

Although we only read the names of those who have died in the last year, many of us use this opportunity to remember the other saints whose stories and memories live on in our hearts. This week, I remembered a few saints I like to remember, Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa, faithful women who dedicated their lives to serving the poor.

Dorothy Day was an American journalist best known for her work in New York during the great depression and some of our country's most difficult years. Day after day, she fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and used her public voice as a journalist to inspire and call others to do the same. Her work was not without personal sacrifice. She was arrested more than once and she gave her own personal financial resources to ensure that others were dry, fed, and warm. Day is best known for founding the Catholic Worker Movement with her companion, Peter Maurin. Her legacy and lifelong commitment to the service of others has earned her consideration for veneration.

Mother Theresa, who has officially been named a Saint in the Catholic Church, also dedicated her life to the poor. She lived out her days serving the people of India who were commonly deemed untouchable. In 1950, she founded the Missionaries of Charity which has grown to include more than 4,500 nuns and actively works to house people living with leprosy, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS in more than 130 countries. Despite her own moments of doubt, Theresa's legacy continues to inspire countless others to faith and action.

These are a couple of my favorite saints...

"The Gospel reading for this All Saints' Sunday lays out the characteristics of the blessed – the 'saints' –" we can easily situate the heroes of our faith like Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, and countless others within Luke's description of the blessed:ⁱⁱ

Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Remembering them and continuing in our reading of Luke's Gospel, we find ourselves trying to make sense of the other side of blessedness. Luke's second list:

Woe to you who are rich,
Woe to you who are full and laughing now,
For you have received your consolation...

At this point many of us are feeling very uneasy about our spiritual and eschatological realities. Can it really be so simple?

There is real tension in this reading, tension and discomfort that exists between the blessings and woes. There is tension because the world we experience is not so black and white. There is discomfort because if we are honest, most of us would find ourselves better described by the latter list, than the former. With only two lists and no overlap between

the two, I am convinced that even the saints wouldn't qualify to participate in God's divine favor.

Perhaps the third part of Jesus' sermon from Luke's Gospel might help us sort all of this out.

But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also... if anyone takes your coat, offer them also your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you... do to others as you would have them do to you. (24 – 31).

Here the static and uncompromising categories of wealth and poverty, hunger and gluttony, acceptance and marginalization are challenged with the unspoken – yet heavily implied – call to holy living. *What are you doing with all that you have been given?*

In this church there are so many examples of saints – both past and present. People who have graciously opened their lives and allowed God to work through them. And each time one of these saints comes to mind, I am reminded of how differently and uniquely God has created and called us to be. Some are gifted with joy, others with prayer and encouragement. Some are teachers, others are behind the scenes workers. Some have vast financial resources and offer them freely and generously. Others have an abundance of time and invest themselves into our community.

Remembering those we lost this last year is a testament to the diversity of the saints God has called together here at Greystone. We remember Thomasine Bennett and the way she invested her life in the children of this church. We remember Virgie Baxley and the legacy of love that she instilled into her family. They live that love each day in this city. We remember Jim Paul and the music he shared that inspired so many. These are our examples of holy living, these are the saints we honor and remember today.

We remember them not through rose colored lenses that blot out all of their shortcomings. But we remember them with grace that allows us to recognize the ways that they lived their lives faithfully, in the tension between the blessings and the woes, seeking to be more like Christ by becoming more fully who God created them to be. Uniquely gifted and uniquely called to the service of others.

Trappist Monk and theologian, Thomas Merton wrote this about "saints":

"A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying Him... This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do... The lakes hidden among the hills are saints, and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her

majestic dance. There is no other like her,... nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is her sanctity."ⁱⁱⁱ

Those we remember as saints are ordinary people, like you and me, who allowed God to work through them for the good of others. For each and every one, that calling was unique and specific. It was uniquely based on the gifts that each one had received and it was specific to the historical moment within which they lived. There was no roadmap or "how to guide" with a one size fits all option. Rather, there was a life of faith that was cultivated each day through listening, and self-giving, over and over again.

If we want to be counted among the saints one day, our journey starts in that same place. A place of recognition about who God has made us to be.

There isn't one uniform path to sainthood. There isn't one set of gifts that outshines the others. There isn't one particular vocation or interpretation or application of faith that leads us directly to the heart of God. There are many. And there always have been. There were 12 disciples who each brought different gifts and resources to the table. There are 4 Gospels that recount and describe the good news of Jesus differently and uniquely. There are more than 10,000 venerated saints in the Catholic tradition, who followed God's calling into at least 10,000 different expressions of righteousness. And there are many in this room who are being called right now to service and holy living, each with different gifts to offer. The one thing that all of us – and all the saints – have in common is that we are called to freely and selflessly give all that we have for the good of those who are poor, those who are hungry, those who are excluded and mocked and marginalized. All of the Gospels, the prophets, and even the Saints agree about that.

In a few moments we will gather around our communion table, participating in an ancient tradition – one shared by Jesus, the disciples, Christians around the world and the saints of this church. At this table, we remember the legacies of holy living that have been set as examples for us. We remember the diversity of gifts and the many expressions of calling that extend from this table. And we ask ourselves how God is calling forward.

Even as we remember this saintly calling, we know that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things... and there is so much grace in that. Grace that bridges the gaps between the categories of blessing and woe, grace that pulls us out of the lie that we will never be good enough, grace that reminds us that all of us are called and capable of holy living... living lives that are nourished and restored at this table, so that we might go from this place and offer our whole lives in the service of one another.

Let us pray...

ⁱ http://jokes.christiansunite.com/Death/The_Evil_Brother.shtml

ⁱⁱ Marjorie Procter-Smith. *Feasting*. 327

ⁱⁱⁱ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (adapted)