

Not the Usual Suspects
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
November 4, 2018

For Reflection: *Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.* Oscar Wilde

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 4:1-14 (portions)

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Each of us was given a gift of grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Meditation: Not the Usual Suspects

November 1 is All Saints' Day—the church's Memorial Day. In Protestant tradition, we have considered the first Sunday in November to be "Remembrance Day" the day when we remember all the faithful who have gone before us, and who are with us now, by the power of memory and according to the inheritance of faith they have bequeathed to us.

Let's consider what we might know or think we know about saints? Who are the saints? Do they have to be mentioned in the Bible to be considered for sainthood? Does one have to be dead to be a saint? How about perfect? Die a gruesome death? Do miracles? Be responsible for miraculous healings after their deaths—as though all healing isn't miraculous? We say Saint Paul or Saint Luke, but isn't Saint just their first name? Many of us would be seriously upset if we didn't sing "For all the Saints" or the pastor omitted the Time of Remembrance from our service but isn't that just a tradition we keep for sentiment's sake—not anything with real meaning anymore? Why are we taking this quiz anyway? Isn't it only the Christian Catholic tradition that believes in saints?

If this were a quiz, how would we have scored? My guess is not too well. As it turns out, for the faithful—saint are not among the usual suspects who may fit some or all of the criteria suggested in the quiz.

Since the Reformation, we Protestants have viewed the saints skeptically. We have been taught that it is idolatry to show reverence to the saints and in that light we might well wonder about what we do in this day in our worship. We reject the practices of acknowledging saints' days or patron saints (except of course for St. Nicholas☺).

One of the consequences of rejection of a particular religious practice is that we tend to reject learning about its foundation—regardless of how practice developed after it. As a result, we are largely ignorant of the Biblical understanding of sainthood—an understanding that pervades the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

Listen again to Paul's words...

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... Each of us was given a gift of grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were ... to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. "Paul did not define the stars,

leaders, martyrs, preachers, teachers or prophets as saints. He said everyone was given a gift of grace to use for the building up of the church. He said everyone in the church is a saint.

Our experience makes it hard for us to believe in saints. No one is that good. Even the most heroic, the most faithful of people can have feet of clay. Martin Luther King may have repainted the vision of our future as a nation, but he didn't footnote well. Mother Teresa lived a remarkable and sacrificial life but years-long depression darkened her spirit. Should we encounter someone who seems to meet the criteria of sainthood (a nebulous set of criteria, if ever there was one, but seem to include tolerating something the rest of us cannot imagine enduring—poverty, pain, frustration, danger or humiliation or simply honoring service over entertainment or self-satisfaction.)—we minimize them or their motivations.

Calling someone a saint can be the occasion for writing off the challenge they present to us and to our way of life. By suggesting saints as "not normal," we excuse ourselves by saying they have received extraordinary gifts from God, such as we can never hope to have. As a result we define such people as ones who are not relevant to the way the rest of the world lives. If they had a life, as the rather offensive phrase puts it, they wouldn't have time to feed the poor, be a medical missionary or visit the homebound.

Dismissing people like Paul of Tarsus, Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa may leave us with niggles of doubt. The possibility of their sainthood may linger, but the sad truth is that most of those we encounter leave us with no such doubt, no sense of possibility. It is more often our lot that those we meet are no holier than we are; that is, if being holy means being super-human; if being holy means having no personal needs; if being holy means being perfect.

Yet the church has never taught that those who are holy, that those who are saints, are perfect. John Calvin wrote, "For the church fathers well knew that the saints often totter in unbelief, sometimes give vent to superfluous oaths, now and then flare into anger, indeed even break out into open railing and are besides troubled with other ills that the Lord thoroughly abominates." There is nothing in that description that excludes me or anyone in this room from the company of saints.

However, I suspect most of us would resist being called saints. We are not so afraid that people would dismiss us, but that they would take us seriously; that they would expect us (and perhaps we would expect ourselves) to live up to the image of sainthood. That, despite Calvin's words, we would be required to be good, patient, sweet and never want anything for ourselves. Oh, in moments of self-dissatisfaction, we ask God for a form of sainthood—that God help us be less selfish, more patient, nicer, less concerned about what we have and more about what others don't have.

We acknowledge all the benefits of being called and living like saints. We'd like ourselves. Others would speak well of us—at least, the ones who were taking us seriously. And we would probably be in pretty good shape with the Lord when the final judgement comes. We'd like to be more saintly. It really wouldn't be a bad way of life. It's just that, well, it doesn't sound like any fun. So our prayers wind up sounding like that of early church father, St. Augustine, who prayed: "Lord, give me freedom from desire,... but not yet." "Lord, make me a saint. Make us saints. But not yet."

Each one of us was given a gift of grace... to equip the saints for ministry... -- Paul's words remind us that it is too late for such a prayer. We are already made saints. Saints are simply people who belong to God and have therefore have received God's gifts of grace.

Oh yes, we descendants of the Reformers not only believe in saints. We believe we are saints. Running the risk of false pride and idolatry, the Reformers maintained the vision of the church as a community of saints. Certainly because it was Biblical. But perhaps for another reason. Perhaps because they recognized that our lives would be far less rich without such a vision. To lose our awareness of the sainthood of believers, would be to lose our awareness of all that is holy and present among us—Christ's gifts to each of us—in the one sitting next to us and behind us and in front of us and in ourselves.

We do not need to pray, "Lord, make us saints." We don't have to perform any task to become a saint. We have joined the body of Christ. We don't have to wait for a vote or trial to be named a saint. We have been baptized. We are named and made saints in Christ. What is left is not for us to achieve holiness, but to make evident in our lives the holiness which has been instilled in us. Paul begs us and God begs us "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called."

Our lives are easier when, without heroes, without saints, we have no standards against which to measure ourselves, no outside influences on that which we proudly call our self-development. Yet, on this Sunday, when we lift up in solemn memory the names of those, now in eternal relationship with God, who have served this community, we are holding not a second funeral for them or a funeral for this church. We are reminding ourselves that we have such heroes, such witnesses, such saints among us who have influenced our developments as Christians.

While weeping in loss is human and is faithful, it is not with the volume of our wailing that we honor their memories. We honor their memories and their gifts to us by living as they lived, as Paul and God in Christ call us to live with the standards of their witness in front of us, urging us onward and upward. On this Sunday, in honor of all the saints of the church, and perhaps especially those we have named whose deaths have left holes in the fabric of our community, who made and make evident the gifts of God's grace to them for the upbuilding of the church, let us remember, that we no less than they, are recipients of God's grace. We, no less than they, are saints.

Let us pray: Lord, by your mercy you have made us saints. By your Spirit, let your gifts be manifest in us. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Most holy God: We give you thanks for this meal and this company, and especially for the awareness that this day brings – that by the power of the meal your son has prepared for us we are lifted into communion with you, and all the saints living and dead, the ones in worship with us now, the ones no longer among us and your people in every place.

Such powerful connection does not allow us to ignore the needs and cries of the world: today we especially remember the victims of gun violence around our nation and throughout the world; the ones who survive and the mourners of those who did not; we think too of our nation and its goals and aspirations, tarnished or gone in the eyes of many –lost to hate speech and racism, violence and fear, a lack of civility and a lack of respect for human dignity, poverty and hopelessness –failures besetting each one of us to one degree or another, regards of where we fall on the spectrum of opinion. As we enter the polls this week, may we bring our best selves to the booth, exercising our votes for a positive vision of what we can be again and yet be.

The Lord's Prayer