

Sermon All Saints Year C

All the Faithful Gathered to Worship God

[RCL] Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

We have two ways of thinking about the saints, and it turns out that neither one of them is very helpful. We think of “Saints” with a capital “S”: St. Peter, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Augustine, the named heroes of the faith who made their mark in the world and left a legacy of holiness that outlasted their lifetimes. And then we think of “saints” with a lowercase “s,” and here we usually mean someone of heroically long-suffering patience or rigidly upright moral conduct. Either concept is intimidatingly inaccessible to us regular folks who routinely lock our keys in our cars and have been known to shout at the television during a particularly key 4th down of a football game.

We don’t feel like we can live like the people who bravely faced the lions in the coliseum and went down to glorious martyrdom, or even our “saintly” neighbor down the block who never misses Sunday worship (or an opportunity to remind you that she never misses Sunday worship). We don’t feel like we *can* live like these people, and if we are honest, we don’t really *want* to live like these people. Dying violently or living joylessly seem to be the two dominant models for sainthood in our society, and neither fulfills Jesus’ hope for us that we might have life and have it abundantly.

The other reason we place the concept of sainthood on an elevated moral pedestal is because that otherness absolves us of responsibility. Saints are so out of touch with what our real lives are like. What does Saint Anselm know about paying the mortgage on time? What does St. John of the Cross’s lofty poetry do for us when we get a flat tire or go through a divorce or are diagnosed with cancer? The saints don’t know what real life is like. And so we don’t have to listen to the prophetic messages that their lives speak, we think.

This is what we tell ourselves to keep us safely distant from sainthood. But the original use of the term saints, particularly by Paul, was meant to indicate all the faithful gathered to worship God. Today is not just about heroes of the faith, and it’s not even just about our own beloved departed who have gone before us. This is not “Some Saints Day.” This is “*All Saints Day*,” and as the hymn so many of us will sing today goes, “for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.”

Did you ever think of the commitment you were making as you sang that cheerful little hymn each November? Our job today is to take away some of the haloed awe we place around saints and ask ourselves: “If we are all saints, what does that mean? If it doesn’t mean heroic glory or unhappy perfection, then what should we do? How should we live?”

The great saints of the church, the heroes of the faith who gave their lives for the gospel, were in fact

folk just like us. We start there. And if we think about it, we really already know that. Poor St. Peter, God bless him, certainly put his foot in it more than once, up to the point of denying and abandoning Jesus. We can easily picture a 21st century St. Peter losing his temper and making rude gestures in traffic. If St. Teresa of Avila lived today, she might use the last scoop of coffee grounds in the break room and not replace the canister. If St. Bridget or St. Francis lived today, they might have embarrassing pictures on Facebook of their younger and wilder days.

We know that the saints were everyday human beings just like us, and we can be sure they made the same mistakes and had the same frailties. And yet something within them led them to do great things for the gospel, to live and sometimes die with incredible courage and boldness. How did they do that? If we are all saints, then we are all called to live as though our lives and our memories will still be important a thousand years from now. How can we live so that our legacy strengthens generations of the faithful to come after us?

What the saints had was an unshakeable commitment to follow Jesus, no matter where that took them. And we have an incredibly vivid portrait of where following Jesus takes us in our gospel lesson from Luke today. Consider the very first sentence we read: “Jesus looked up at his disciples.” What does that imply? In order for Jesus to look *up* at his disciples, he had to be at a level below them. So take your mental picture from old Sunday School illustrations of Jesus standing up on a rock above a crowd of people to preach to them, and stand it on its head. Jesus was down on the ground as he taught this most central of his messages. He was crouching or kneeling in the dirt as he healed someone prostrate with pain and illness.

Picture being a disciple standing around in a circle as Jesus gently and carefully lays hands on a pain-wracked man or woman, the entire laser-focus of his love trained on this beloved child of God, ready to pour out his healing grace. And hands on the dirty, bad-smelling, sore-laden body of some hopeful soul, he *looks up* at his disciples and says, “Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry, who weep, who are excluded and reviled and persecuted. You are blessed, and you are beloved, and you are mine.”

Jesus speaks to us from the heart of frail, suffering, flawed humanity, because that is where he lives. He chooses to be with and in the pain of the world, and he calls us to follow him there. That was the special charism of the great saints. They weren’t spiritual athletes, accruing an ever-escalating number of holiness points. They knew that their own weaknesses combined with the desperate need of the world created the very conditions for God to work miracles, and they gave themselves to that process wholeheartedly.

That sounds backwards, doesn’t it? It seems like the saints would bring all their strength and intelligence to bear on the levers of power and wealth. But instead they entrusted their weak and wounded selves to the Jesus they found at the bottom of the world, at the bottom of the chasm within themselves, looking up at them and telling them they were blessed. And they heard him there. They followed him there. And through them, he changed the world.

Many of us hearing this gospel today are not literally poor and hungry. But those of us blessed with economic riches and societal privileges are often desperately poverty-stricken in other ways. We are starving for meaning in our lives. We weep silent inward tears of loneliness and depression. We hunger for community without realizing it. We thirst for our own lost integrity and hope in a world driven mad by greed and cynicism.

But we need not fear looking down into the depths of suffering, both inward and outward. Whether the abyss we run from is the hungry and oppressed around the world and in our neighborhoods, or the undiscovered darkness within our own hearts, when we look down into those places, we find Jesus looking up at us.

And where he is, we need never fear to go. That is what the great saints, the heroes of the faith, knew. They saw Jesus look up at them and call them blessed, and so they followed him down into the depths. And there, they found healing, and joy, and communion with God and with one another.

An individual who follows Jesus down to join with him in lifting the whole world up. That's all a saint is. No glory, no perfection, not even any particular holiness. Just mustering the courage to say yes to his love, his love that reaches out to touch us in our poorest and most wounded places.

Want to know if you're a saint? See Jesus look up at you and say, "You are blessed." Take that truth into your heart and know that today, All Saints' Day, is for you.

Written by The Rev. Whitney Rice. Rice is the Associate Rector at St. Francis-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. She comes to ordained ministry by way of the University of Kansas and Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. See more of her work at www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2016 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.