

Saints for Us

Luke 6:20-31

We are going to take a bit of a detour on our journey through the Gospel of Luke this morning, turning back a few chapters to find a passage that speaks to us on this observance of All Saints Day. We are a little ahead of the calendar, but All Saints Day is November 1, and we need to be careful that its observance doesn't get lost in the very unsaintly event of Halloween. That is really All Hallows Eve, or the evening before All Saints Day. How that became a time for collecting candy from the neighborhood is a bit of a mystery. We can still have fun with Halloween if we do it right, and that should start with a proper observance of All Saint's Day.

Before we get to the passage from Luke, let's get together on the All Saint's part. We should start with a definition of "saint". The original Biblical meaning of "saint" is what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews had in mind when he referred to the "great cloud of witnesses" – all those friends, family, ancestors, and people from Christian history who formed Christianity, formed the church, formed us, made us into the people and the church that we are. People like those we named earlier.

These are exactly the kind of people that Jesus is describing in this passage from Luke 6, which you will recognize as Luke's account of the teaching of Jesus known from the Gospel of Matthew as the "Beatitudes".

READ Luke 6:20-31

The person that Jesus is describing here is the very definition of a saint, in the original Biblical meaning of the word.

Let's go back to that original Biblical meaning of the term "saint" – a person who believes and lives that Jesus Christ is Lord – not an intellectual belief but a living, active belief. It is belief that manifests itself in life, that shows itself through obedience to God's will, and that demonstrates itself through true and faithful witness to Jesus Christ as a life-style. It is a life-style that is not about glorifying the individual, but whose life glorifies God. It is a life of humility and grace. This is the description of the person that we should want to be.

It is also a description of the kind of people that we should be actively seeking as our examples, role models, and mentors. Our ultimate example of the life we should be seeking is that of Jesus Christ, and we can, and should, see the example of Christ in His people. We may not find the complete package in any one person, but if we actively seek the counsel of other solid Christians, we will find people who help guide us.

During the Convocation and Pastor's School at Duke Divinity School last week, we had highlighted for us in number of different ways a verse from Isaiah, Isaiah 30:21, which says "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying 'This is the way; walk in it.'" That is really important. It is measure of God's grace, in a form that we have talked about before as prevenient grace, that we receive God's guidance to stay on the path to life and right relationship with God, all the time. When we begin to wander off the path, there will be a voice to re-direct us. Sometimes that voice will be that of another Christian.

Whose voice are we seeking? In the June edition of Reader's Digest, there is a story reporting the results of a poll asking who people trusted. The story lists the top 100 people that Americans trust the most. The top 4, and 5 of the top 10, were actors. I know we shouldn't form opinions about the entire country based on a sample of 1000 people, but there is something fundamentally wrong when the most trusted people in the country are people who are paid, and paid very well, because of their ability to convince you that they are somebody else. There are a handful of people in that top 100 whose influence has something to do with their faith, like Tim Tebow, but the only person on the list who would be first defined as a religious leader is Billy Graham, who came in at number 67, about 40 places behind Judge Judy. We have a problem.

Whose voice are you listening to? Jesus tells us that we should be listening to voices of humility, perseverance in the face of hostility, the joy of the redeemed, grace toward all, and devotion to right relationship with God.

We have to be listening and discerning to distinguish those voices from the voices of greed and self-centeredness and despair and divisiveness that dominate what we hear. We have to work at finding people whose lives will have a positive influence on our

faith, who show us in their everyday living what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We recognized people who fit that description for us individually earlier in the service. But it is not the manner of a person's death that makes them saints in our eyes, it is their lives. As we celebrate All Saints Day today, I think it is important for us to recognize both the saints still among us as well as those who have gone on to heaven. Scripture recognizes and celebrates both.

The Biblical concept of saints has at least two key pieces. First, in the Bible, we discover that the term is for living believers as well as those who had died in the Lord. The people that Paul addresses as the saints at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica were very much alive. There had also been those among them who had died in the Lord and those who had died under persecution. They were all joined together in the term "saints" by their living faith, their living belief in Jesus Christ. These were – and are – real people. That "cloud of witnesses" we read about is real.

The genuine value to us of people who exemplify discipleship will be completely lost if we come to think of them as a kind of superhuman or super Christian, with some sort of unexplainable connection to the heart of God that is beyond our capacity to attain. The people that model discipleship and faithful witness are not superhuman and they are not perfect, but they are rather modeling what true, whole humanity in the abundant life of faith in Jesus Christ is really all about. The people whose lives are described in this passage from Luke will be distinctive because they will be dramatically different from the world around them. These are people that the world would reject as having their value system upside down. Yet Jesus tells us who ultimately has it right.

The second key part of the Biblical concept of the saints is that the word is never used in the New Testament singly. The Greek word *hagios* is the only word used for saints in the New Testament and it is always plural. It is always addressed to the fellowship of believers, knit together into Christ's one true church. What that means is that sainthood, sanctification, the completion of right relationship with God, can only be realized in community. That is why we believe in the "communion of saints" and celebrate our place with the "great cloud of witnesses".

When we gather for worship, we come as a community of sinners, convicted by the truth of how far we are from the ideal modeled by Christ, yet strengthened, empowered, and emboldened to be the true people of God by the example of that same Christ and the great cloud of witnesses. We are joining together with all the fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ over all of Christian history in this great remembrance of who and what got us here and what will get us to where God made us to be. That is what being the church really means.

If your chosen path is toward right, eternal relationship with God, there will be voices in your ear continually directing you in the right way. Seek the voice of God in all the forms that God imagines for you; listen to God's people as they pass on the Word from God; and celebrate the communion of saints.

Amen