

Sermon "Saints Like Us?" Matthew 5:1-12 Isaiah 25:6-9 November 4, 2012 All Saints' Sunday

"She was such a saint!" the woman's friends declared, as they milled around the funeral home. "She never said a bad word about anybody...she was always there to help out... Not a mean bone in her body... She never hurt a flea..."

We've heard these words, and perhaps spoken them ourselves.. Death provides opportunity to review a life.... This week we've heard stories of folks who risked (and sometimes gave up) their lives trying to save others as the storm surge devastated the coastal areas. There have been some incredibly brave acts of heroism. Sometimes, though, our definition of "saint" may be anemic when compared to what Jesus asks us to do.

Us? Yes, *us*. Saints are folks whose lives have been lived so as to be useful to God, to let God's love shine through.. Lives lived so as to communicate God's interest and concern to another person.

I grew up in the Episcopal Church. Over and over I heard the song, found in the Methodist Hymnal # 481, "I sing a Song of the Saints of God," and over and over I heard the priest and teachers stress that we, too, are called to be saints. The persons listed in the song were supposed to represent folks from all different walks of life. "One was a doctor, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast.. A shepherdess, ... and I mean to be one, too..."

These saints did what they did because they believed in God and trusted that God was stronger than even death. They believed what we heard proclaimed from Isaiah 25, that some day God will wipe away all tears. These saints were witnesses to their hope by the way they lived, by what they did because of their commitment to what God had done through Jesus Christ.

Today – All Saints Sunday – we gather to be reminded that we are a community of saints, not because we are so wonderful, but because God is willing to work in and through the lives of real people. I grew up thinking that saints were perfect people whose feet barely touched the ground. Now I know that saints were and are not perfect people; they were and are everyday people like you and me, doing their best to follow Jesus. Anybody who claims to be a follower of Jesus is called to be set apart, to live differently...even as Jesus taught in the lesson we heard from the Gospel of Matthew. In the Beatitudes Jesus turned expectations upside down: Blessed are the poor, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted.... A saint risks trusting that Jesus meant what he said. A saint remembers that Jesus gave us two big rules: love God, and love others.

A woman was about to break under the pressures of her life. She was a Christian, but nothing seemed to help her. Her marriage was in trouble, the people with whom she worked got on her nerves and she could no longer hide her temper, and she felt angrier and angrier, not even sure who her real target was. She felt that her life was falling apart; her blood pressure rose and her weight increased; her joy disappeared. Anything could set off a real bout of depression within her.... She started to plan how to end her life.

Her “saint” was the check-out clerk in the grocery store. As the woman went through her line, this “saint” looked at her and apparently saw her pain. She said to the woman, “You remind me of me, a few years ago, just about on the breaking point. If that’s true, give me a call.” And she handed her a little card with her name and number and one little Bible verse, from Psalm 46, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Surprised and embarrassed, the woman mumbled something and left the store. She didn’t go home, she went to her church. There was a meeting going on that night, so the building was open. Quietly, so nobody saw her, she slipped into the dark sanctuary. In the silence, she poured out her heart to God, hoping that nobody would come in. Nobody did. As her tears and all the hopelessness of her spirit flowed out, she clutched the little card.... Suddenly, she stopped her sobbing and complaints, and knew in her heart what she could not read in the dark, “Be still, and know that I am God.” God is here, she realized, with me.... No matter what, I will try to breathe in this promise, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

No, this woman did not suddenly have a great marriage and no problems. She still struggled. But she was not without hope. She remembered God with her....and when things overwhelmed her, she repeated God’s message to her, and found the traction of a calmer spirit, a relationship that gave her strength to live.

We’re called to be saints, people who are willing to let God’s light shine through our lives for others.

A few years ago we met up with some friends we had known on Long Island, and one of our friends told me a story he had heard about heaven. It is sort of challenging and sort of thought-provoking; I hope you will find it meaningful. Here’s the story:

Once upon a time, there was a decent Christian man who died and went to heaven. When he arrived at the pearly gates, St. Peter greeted him and offered to show him around. Together, they walked down the streets. As they passed one section, St. Peter told the man, “Here are the Muslims.” The man was surprised. “What? You have Muslims in heaven? But they don’t believe in Jesus!” St. Peter replied, “That is true. But whereas many Christians give God an hour of prayer and worship at best each week, these Muslims pray at least five times every day, bowing down and offering their lives to God. God appreciates their devotion, and so God has made a place for them in heaven.”

A bit further down the road, St. Peter said, “Here we have Buddhists.” “Buddhists!” the man exclaimed. “The Muslim people at least were children of Abraham, but why are Buddhists allowed in heaven?” St. Peter explained, “Those who follow the teachings of Buddha are people of peace, honoring creation and each other. They seek to live in harmony with all. God appreciates their gentle ways, and has allowed them a place in heaven.”

Perplexed, the man continued walking with St. Peter along the streets of heaven. Finally, St. Peter declared, “Here we have the atheists.” “Wait a minute!” the man protested. “How in the

world can God let atheists into heaven? Atheists don't even believe in God!" St. Peter replied, "You are correct, and this has deeply grieved our Lord. However, many who consider themselves atheists even so act in very loving ways towards their neighbors, tending the sick, educating the poor, reaching out to the downtrodden. The very fact that they do not believe in God means that they also do not expect to receive any reward for their good deeds. They do whatever loving acts they do simply to do good, not because they think they are earning points for an afterlife. God honors this, and so God surprises them with what they did not believe could be possible." (End of story - source unknown - edited from what was told to me by Ron Phipps)

We are called to be "saints," to be different than most of the folks in this world because of our commitment to follow Jesus. This means loving our enemies and praying for those who hurt us. It means trusting that Jesus's way is in the long term stronger than the "Gotta get ahead" stuff so prevalent in our society. Every day, we choose whether or not to let God's love shine through our lives. As we let God's love shine through, we will find ourselves more and more able to love God.

In a few minutes we will share the communion meal. It is a meal of Life given in the face of death, of fullness offered in the face of emptiness, of forgiveness given right in the face of sin, of hope offered wherever there is despair. This meal knows the world and all its burdens and meanness and disappointments and griefs; but it also proclaims for each of us the love and power of God. It is a meal of grace, to fill us with the strength we need and to give us a foretaste of the banquet we're going to share someday with all the loved ones who have gone before us, when God's kingdom is complete.

As we take the bits of bread and share the cup of juice, may we be filled with hope and strengthened to let our lives be used by God as "saintly lives," to share the light and hope of God's love with others. Every day, no matter how old or young we are, no matter how easy or hard our lives, we can choose to live as saints, as real people who have real problems but who are upheld, loved, fed and led by the Living God. When we dare to love God and to show love to other people, as Jesus asked us to, God's Light will shine through us! Thank God. Amen.

Benediction

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

As Paul encouraged the people, may we hear his words, " 16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word." (New Revised Standard Version) Amen.