

We Want To Be In That Number

Luke 6:17-26
November 4, 2007

I.

Today we celebrate one of the principal feast days of the church, All Saints Day. And by saints, I'm not referring to a football team a few miles down the road, but rather to all those people from the beginning of our church to the present day who through their selflessness, and sometimes martyrdom, helped build the church and bring Christ's love into peoples lives.

It frequently has been said that if we as Christians can see the coming of God's kingdom, it's only because we are standing on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us. Through their work and sacrifices, most Christians are able to worship in freedom, without persecution, and to publicly proclaim their faith in whatever way we want.

II.

But saints in the larger sense are not just heroes of the past. We also encounter saints in our lives, and God leads people to holy works all the time. So we should not think that saints are people with whom we could never identify. Saints can be people just like us. I'm sure there are people in this church today who have done great services to others and have lived holy lives even though they might not have a day named for them on the church calendar.

So, how do we define a saint? What are those special aspects of the lives of the people whose memories we commemorate today? What does it mean to be a saint?

There are two things to consider. One, as I mentioned earlier, is that the saints we honor on All Saints Day are the men and women who in the last two thousand years have become well-known for service to God and the Church. In another sense, however, we all are saints just by being Christians. Paul addressed most of his letters to the "saints" in this sense. In the Apostles Creed we acknowledge our belief in the communion of saints as all Christians, living and dead.

This does not mean, however, that we all live saintly lives all the time. The early reformers of the Protestant Church proclaimed that we simultaneously are saints and sinners. And the question is how to emphasize the part about saints, while diminishing the part about sinners.

III.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke offers insights on that subject. It contains four blessings and four warnings. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated by others. And warnings to the rich, and those who are full. Warnings to people who are laughing, and those about whom others speak well.

What's that all about? Where do we fit into that picture? Well, we probably feel pretty secure and well-off. At first glance, we might not think we are the people Jesus was blessing. We are not poor, or hungry, or weeping. Many of us might think that we're more like those who will experience the woes.

But that would be a superficial reading of today's Gospel. It's not just a simple passage from Scripture. It's complex, and full of meaning for the people of Jesus' time, as well as for us today.

An important part of Jesus' teaching today involved blessings. What exactly are blessings? Are blessings equivalent to happiness, for example? Perhaps they are in some cases, but certainly not in today's reading. Here, the ideas of blessings and happiness can convey entirely different meanings.

Jesus said blessed are the poor, and the hungry, and those who weep. He did not say happy are the poor, happy are the hungry, and happy are those who weep. That would have been unrealistic. People who are poor, hungry, and weeping probably are not very happy.

In fact, the emotion of happiness might more easily be attributed to those whom Jesus denounced. He said woe to the rich, the full, and to those who are laughing. But those are the people who in our way of thinking are likely to be happy, aren't they?

So today's lesson obviously goes beyond our everyday way of thinking. Certainly many of the saints in our history have been poor and hungry. But did Jesus mean to say that people who have wealth, or are happy, or who are spoken well of by others, cannot be saints?

As I have mentioned before in sermons about wealth and poverty, we should recognize that nowhere in the Gospels did Jesus condemn wealth, and nowhere did he glorify poverty. He recognized that each contains dangers. Wealth has the potential to cause people to become self-absorbed and prideful with their own possessions, and poverty can cause people to grow bitter with envy and to become covetous.

And Jesus certainly did not call for the wholesale transfer of property from prideful and self-absorbed rich people to envious and covetous poor people. His message was far deeper than that, both for the rich and the poor.

Jesus blessed those who were living in poverty, hunger, and oppression not because it was a good way to live, but because he wanted to encourage and sustain them. Jews in first century Palestine existed under brutal Roman domination with little chance for anything different, and Jesus offered them hope.

Then, on the other side of coin, Jesus denounced the way in which wealth can corrupt and separate people from God. He specifically had in mind the rich who failed to even recognize the poor who were living right outside their gates. He proclaimed woes on the rich not just because they were wealthy, but because they chose personal gratification over using their wealth in service to God.

It is very difficult to read the Bible, and to then think only of ourselves. Everywhere you turn you encounter God's call to reach out to others, to help those in need, and to share our blessings. Those are the qualities that we recognize when we honor the saints.

IV.

So, how do we respond? What are we supposed to do? We hear readings and sermons about mission, and readings and sermons about stewardship, and readings and sermons about not letting ourselves become too complacent and comfortable in the blessings we have. I hope this all does not start to sound like background music that can be tuned in or out. And I pray that that the Holy Spirit leads us all to do, and to continue doing, those things that we recognize as saintly qualities in others.

Let me offer a question. Suppose Jesus were standing here today, right in front of the altar here at St. Thomas. Now, I know that is not how Scripture tells us he will come again. But indulge me if you would, and imagine Jesus standing here. And then suppose that he would look at each of us, and then look at our church, and then proclaim some blessings and some woes. What would he say?

I'm not going to make any predictions about that, although I am sure he would recognize many saints among us. Instead I would just ask us all to think about what it means to be secure and well-off. Think about what it's like to be reasonably comfortable, to be able to do

pretty much what we want and live the lives we have planned for ourselves even in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Then I would ask us to think about the people on the Mississippi coast, and here in Hancock County, who don't have what we have, and who live from day to day, from meal to meal, and from shelter to shelter. And the tragedy is compounded when this involves people with young children for whom hope in the future is not even a meaningful concept.

And after having thought not only about ourselves but also about others, I would urge us to take an inventory of our lives and what we do with ourselves, our time, and especially our resources, and then answer that question about what Jesus would say.

V.

Blessed are the poor and the needy and those who weep. Woe to the wealthy and the prideful and the self-absorbed. If we think about it we probably have some idea of where we stand.

And we know that this is not something we can just get around to later. We know that are not called to care for others on a one-time basis just to get our tickets punched. We are called to a way of life, to a discipline, and to a daily routine of being what God wants us to be.

Many of us can invest our time and energy and resources in that work, and we can help the church reach out into the community. Others of us may not be able to do that any more, and so we help the church to do it for us. It works either way. It's why the church is here.

But at the end of the day we all know that we have been reasonably successful in our lives, and now we look behind that success and ask ourselves if we have been equally faithful. Are we using our blessings as God would have us do? Do our lives reflect the qualities of those early saints who put others ahead of themselves?

We've all heard that old gospel hymn, "When the Saints go Marching In." The lyrics point to a future time of the coming of the kingdom. But it doesn't have to be limited to the future. In a way, we know that the saints have been marching in and are always marching in. And we also know that as Christians we are called to be in that number because it has been so ever since Jesus called us to love one another.

And while we probably never will be official saints in the life of the church, we can be saints in the lives of others if we seek God's will through the Holy Spirit, if we share our blessings, and if we love others as Christ calls us to do. Then we too can be in that number. *Amen.*