

Loving To Be In That Number

Mark 12:28-34
November 4, 2012

I.

Today we celebrate one of the principal feast days of the church, All Saints Day. On the calendar All Saints Day was last Thursday, the day after Halloween. But because it is so important, the church's tradition invites us also to observe it on the first Sunday after the actual day.

And after I'm finished I would like to ask Mary Mizell, who is one of our saints here in the church, to come up and briefly speak to us about St. Thomas and stewardship.

As we consider this holy day, we might ask ourselves what it takes to be a saint. A quick answer is that saints are all those people from the beginning of our church to the present time who, through their selflessness, generosity, and sometimes even martyrdom, helped build the church and bring Christ's love into peoples' lives.

Do we see them around today? Are they part of our culture? Let's go back to Halloween night and recall if any kids came to our doors dressed as saints. Some of them might have been wearing black and gold uniforms, but those aren't the saints we remember this morning. That comes tomorrow night.

As you think back, you probably saw quite a few kids pretending to be devils or demons or witches or zombies, but probably no one showed up and said that he was St. Thomas, or that she was Mother Theresa, or that their group was dressed up as apostles.

And, of course, people in that last group traditionally have been saints of the church. But saints in a larger sense are not just historical figures. We also encounter saints in our lives now. God leads people to holy works all the time even though they might not have an official day named for them on the church calendar.

Saints can be people just like us. St. Paul addressed many of his letters to "saints" when he was referring to worshippers in the churches he had formed. In the Apostles Creed we acknowledge our belief in the communion of saints as being all Christians, living and dead.

And so it is appropriate today also to remember those who worshipped here at St. Thomas and during this year have joined the saints in heaven. We lift up and honor the memories of Phyllis Buford, Betty Hopkins, and Rose Fryer. May their souls, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

II.

But our unity in the communion of saints does not mean we always live saintly lives. Early reformers of the church proclaimed that we simultaneously are saints and sinners. Our challenge is to emphasize the part about being saints, and to diminish the part about being sinners.

This dilemma can be illustrated by the story about a priest and a rabbi standing on either side of a country road, each holding up a sign. The priest's sign said, "Turn Before it's Too Late," while the rabbi's proclaimed, "The End is Near." Soon a car raced by, and the driver paid no attention to the signs. Almost immediately there was a screeching of tires, followed by a big splash.

The rabbi turned to the priest and asked, "Should we try different signs?" "Yes," said the priest, "perhaps 'Bridge Out' might be better." The point here is that we can find ourselves in deep water when the instructions are not clear. Without direction we can be torn between listening to the little angel that sits on one of our shoulders, or to the little devil that sits on the other.

But Jesus tells us how to deal with that. He said in today's gospel to love God and our neighbors. Who would argue with that? We have heard this basic principle of Christianity for years. On the surface it seems so obvious that a sermon on that subject could almost deliver itself.

And given the many uncertainties and complexities of religion and theology, don't we often look for some easy answers; some central principles that are at the heart of it all?

Jesus' words describe that all-encompassing truth. But, as is sometimes the case, the simple answers in theory are not always so simple in practice. This seemingly basic instruction is not evident many aspects of contemporary life.

III.

Let's look at these two commandments that Jesus proclaimed. They are referred to as the Great Commandments or the Summary of the Law. They include the Ten Commandments, as well as all of Jesus' other teachings. There is nothing in our faith that exists apart from, or is unaffected by, the obligation to love God and our neighbor.

But what did Jesus really mean when he gave these instructions to humanity? Can love be commanded? Can love be summoned on demand? Does it come in a flash bang moment, or does it develop over time? How does it work?

I'm reminded of the story of a fellow who was walking past a bookstore and noticed a book in the window with the title "Learning to Love." He went inside to inquire, and found that it actually was the twelfth volume of an encyclopedia that covered topics from "learning" to "love."

The fellow was disappointed in a way that can parallel what happens in the church. People can come to church searching for how to learn to love, and instead find an encyclopedia on theology.

But we don't need much theology to love God and our neighbors. That love comes through prayer, and worship, and asking God to help us express it. And I would like to start with one of these commandments, and then talk about the other.

When Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, he meant that it is something we do with our entire being. Nothing is held in reserve.

There are no half measures, no cutting corners, and no doing it tomorrow. Jesus did not say just to trust God, or just to worship God, or only to pray to God, or simply to be obedient to God. He said to love God with all we have. Loving God means doing all of those things together. It means trusting, worshipping, praying, and obedience.

As a result, loving God is not only a matter of feeling, but also of action, doing, commitment, and how we live in the world. Here's the key. If we love God, then God will be an integral part of how we think, act, decide things, present ourselves to others, and interact with each other.

And when we follow the second commandment and love our neighbor, we are to do it just as we love ourselves. Note that Jesus did not say to love our neighbor *instead* of ourselves or *more than* ourselves, but *as* ourselves.

This means we are called to be just as willing to do something for another as we are to do it for ourselves. It is the Golden Rule we learned as children (Lk. 6:31). We treat the needs of others as important as our own needs.

IV.

That all sounds good, doesn't it? How could we disagree? But it does not happen if we rely only upon ourselves. We, on our own, cannot just manufacture love for God or for anyone else.

Even so, today's Gospel tells us that it is not optional. Jesus did not give us a choice. We are not free to not love. And so, Jesus once again gave us teachings that cannot be fulfilled in our own strength, but rather call upon our faith.

This means that if we truly want to love God and our neighbors, and if we ask God through the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us in this way, then he will enable us to love God and our neighbors as active and visible manifestations of our being. We will find that we can express to God and others the same love that God first expressed for us (1 Jn. 4:19).

And the church can help us do this. As individuals we probably experience times when these commandments are not our priorities. As part of the church, however, and as part of the Body of Christ, we find it is easier. Jesus' call to love also is a call to live together in a community.

V.

So, today, as we enter November and the end of the year draws closer, how do we think that we have loved God and our neighbor? What have we done, and what will we do, to carry out these commandments?

Perhaps, as we think back we might remember individual acts of charity and kindness that we have offered to others, or have received from others, and we might recall deeply spiritual moments where in the silence of prayer we felt the Holy Spirit move within us.

For many of us these moments grew from the community of faith that we share here at St. Thomas. And for many of us our ability to live into these two Great Commandments is linked to the collegiality and fellowship we have here in our church.

I know we try to do what Jesus told us to do. And when we do it we see that it is good and our hearts are moved to do even more. Such is the nature of love. The more we give, the more we seem to get back. The more we honor God and each other, the more we seem to be blessed.

We've all heard that old gospel hymn, "When the Saints go Marching In." And even though it might make us think of the Superdome, the lyrics actually point to a future time of the coming of the God's kingdom.

But it doesn't have to be limited to the future. The saints have been marching in for two thousand years, and are marching in right now. And following the lyrics of that old hymn, we know that as Christians we are called to be in that number and march with them. It has been so ever since Jesus first told us to love one another.

And while most of us never will be official saints in the life of the church as an institution, we can be saints in the lives of others and in our common life here at St. Thomas. If we seek God's will through the Holy Spirit, if we share blessings that God has given us, and if we love others as Christ calls us to do, then we too always will be in that number. *Amen.*