

All the Saints

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10,13-14; Revelation 7:2-4,9-17; Matthew 5:1-12; Psalm 149

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All Saints Day

I had studied about those who were called saints for years.

Why, I had even gone back to the New Testament and probed deeply to find out where saints referred to in the New Testament and what the word meant.

But, it was my dad who really taught me about what being a saint meant. But, not in the way that you might expect.

My dad was a simple but generous man. He worked as a grain elevator operator in the little town in Iowa that I grew up in. Growing up in the United States in the early 1900s, the son of Swedish immigrants, my dad was raised as virtually every other boy and girl of their period was with some sort of church connection.ⁱ

But, also like many growing up in that period, my dad and his brothers had more of a Churchianity than they did a Christianity. Their commitment was not so much to Christ as their Saviour, as much as it was to the church they belonged to. Oh, if you had asked them whether they believed in God, and in Christ, they would of course have said yes. But, they talked of "joining a church", or "going to church" or "get up, young man, you boys need to get to church!" rather than of God, or of Jesus Christ, or of the Holy Spirit.

My dad might not have ever thought twice about where his faith lay, had not his son, also raised in Churchianity for years, rejected it as nothing more than a kind of veneer on good old American middle-class values and living. It was not until his son encountered the living, life-changing Jesus Christ himself, that my dad began to ask himself questions about his own faith.

My dad was never afraid to learn, as I hope I am never afraid to learn, from anyone around him, including his children. And when the Lord Jesus Christ took hold of my life and turned me around, my dad -- honest and open man that he was -- couldn't help but notice.

So, he went to a mission that had just begun in our home town. My dad somehow felt that it was there that he might find answers about what had happened to me. He asked the Southern Baptist minister: "You don't know my son, but this is what has happened to him. Can you tell me what's going on?"

The minister proceeded to tell my dad about saving faith in Jesus Christ. And, like the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road, like the Philippian jailer, when my dad heard the Gospel proclaimed

in this way, he turned to the minister and said: "What about me? It sounds as though I need that same faith that my son has found." And there and then, my dad gave his life to Christ.

My dad was not a reading man. I can never remember him ever reading a book. He loved to read the newspaper, but he was almost always more interested in the crossword puzzles than in anything else. But, when he became a Christian, he started to read the Bible. He began attending a Bible study at the mission.

Some months later, I returned home for a visit. Dad had written very briefly and somewhat shyly in a letter about his new found faith. But when I returned, I also wanted to meet the Southern Baptist pastor, a great fellow. We talked of what had happened to dad, and to others in the community.

But, the pastor also told me the story that leads me to talking about saints. He said that, as they had begun a study of Paul's letter to the Romans, they got no further than chapter 1 verse 7, in which Paul addresses his letter "to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints". The pastor had said to the members of the Bible study that while it was true that Paul was writing hundreds of years earlier to Christian men and women in Rome, that it was no less true today that the living Word of God comes to us and still speaks to us as "saints".

The pastor said that at that point, my dad looked up at him with a puzzled look on his face, and said: "Wait a minute. Are you saying that we are saints?"

"That's right", the pastor had said, with a southern drawl of course!

"But, I'm not a saint," Dad had protested.

The pastor had smiled and said: "Yes, you are."

My dad shook his head and said: "Nope. That can't be right."

The pastor responded: "Anyone who is in Christ is a saint. According to the Scriptures, Laurence, you are a saint."

How can that be? I am not a saint. Anyone who is in Christ is a saint. According to the Scriptures, Laurence, you are a saint.

If you're anything like my dad, or like most Christians I know, you have said or maybe right now are saying to yourself as well: Me? A saint? No way!

One of the reasons we do this is because of Churchianity. It makes this a whole lot easier by saying: "No, that's right, you probably aren't a saint. There are particular people whom the church says, because of the quality of their lives and the particularly special things that God has

done in them, are saints. They are more pure, more righteous. They are ones who are the truly blessed. The rest of us: oh, we just muddle along in our mediocrity, nothing very special, but certainly acknowledging those who are."

Now, there's no problem with heroes. Heroes give us examples to look up to and to emulate.

But there is problem with the kind of thinking that says: "They are heroes, but I'm just ordinary." Do you know what that kind of thinking does: "I'm nothing special", "I'm certainly no saint"? It's like shrugging your shoulders and giving up.

I think it's also something that those who call themselves Christians hide behind: "Wouldn't it be better if "they" were heroes. I could never be anything. Let the drums roll for them. I'll just stay here in hiding."

No, the truth of the Gospel is that all who are in Christ are saints. "All Saints" day? All who are in Christ are saints.

Let me help you understand what this means.

Over the past weeks, you have heard Gospel reading after Gospel reading from Matthew. Early on, you heard how Jesus began to gather all sorts of people around him as he spoke. These were not people about whom there was anything special. They were just common, ordinary people. In fact, they were the kind of people you would find in any town, in any street, in any workplace. Even in grain elevators and aluminum factories, farmers in the fields of Palestine or farmers in the fields of Michigan!

But, over the recent past weeks, you have also heard a growing drama in the Gospel of Matthew. You have seen a group of men gather at the back of the crowd as Jesus speaks, their arms folded, listening to Jesus as he speaks to the crowds.

Then, after they have heard and understood what Jesus says, you can see them murmuring to each other, and the looks on their faces indicate that they are upset with what has been said.

Then, when their grumbling gets them all worked up inside, they try to trick Jesus into getting into trouble. But that doesn't work either and they are silenced. Then, as the teachers of the Law start to walk away, they hear Jesus start to hear Jesus teaching the crowds and his disciples to watch out for these teachers, these hypocrites. "Woe to them", Jesus says, their days are numbered as your leaders.

Not surprisingly, these are the same men who, toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew will start to plot to have Jesus turned over the authorities and killed.

What do you think could possibly have gotten them so worked up that they went from listeners, to grumblers, to plotters, to accomplices in murder?

It was this: The teachers thought of themselves as guardians of the Law of God, the mullahs of Israel. As the name Pharisee implies, they saw their role as guaranteeing the purity of Israel, keeping it holy and presenting themselves as examples of righteousness. They saw themselves as unique and particular “saints”, the very people identified in the book of Daniel as the “saints of the Most High” (Daniel 7.27). Because of who they were and how they had kept themselves pure, and their role as teachers, they were guaranteed seats in the Kingdom of God, the best seats.

And then along comes Jesus, who begins to offer a place at the table to anyone -- the ordinary worker, the failed sinner... even women... even non-Jews. They see and hear him “welcoming sinners and inviting them to his table”.

Not surprisingly, they are furious. Jesus is not only challenging their teaching but also challenging their hard earned place at the banquet table. Jesus is taking away the title “saint” from them and giving it to all sorts of undeserving people.

If we believe that Jesus was uniquely qualified to make this judgment call, then we should also know why he did it. He looked right into the hearts of men and women and saw what was there, whether they admitted it or not, for nothing was hidden from him: “from whom no secrets are hidden”. He saw good intentions and bad, pain and happiness, failures and successes, love and hate. And most of these people had these things written all over their faces. That’s why they were there!

What he saw in the hearts of the teachers of the Law were the same things but on their faces...? There was nothing wrong with them; they were just fine, thank you very much. In fact, people looking at the teachers would see piety, and righteousness, and holiness, fine dress on feasts and faces of mourning on solemn fast days. The only way that they could appear in public and be honoured by the people was by wearing a mask, which is exactly what the Greek word “hypocrite” implied: an actor, someone who comes on stage, in a mask, pretending to be someone he is not. That’s what the teachers of the Law were.

- They pretended to be poor in spirit, while they amassed the wealth that people would heap upon them.ⁱⁱ
- They pretended to mourn, on the occasions of fasts, their faces disfigured, so that people would comment: “what a saint!” but inside they couldn’t wait to get home to a good meal!
- They pretended to be meek, gentle, and merciful, and then preyed upon the helpless by pouncing on those who had failed and endearing themselves to well-endowed widows’ houses.

- They presented themselves as paragons of righteousness -- and didn't hesitate to point to their ancestors who were martyrs -- but when martyrdom presented itself to them, they always found a way to make friends with the enemy and avoid it.
- They presented themselves as pure in heart when in fact all they were was a mask of righteousness.
- They presented themselves as peacemakers and sought every way possible to kill the prince of peace.

They were, in short, hypocrites.

But, let's not be overly hard on the teachers of the Law. They were not the only "hypocrites" ever to have lived. In fact, Churchianity is full of people who wear masks, who are afraid to tell others and even God, who they really are. Churchianity is full of people who will never, ever be saints for that reason.

Not so with Christianity. Do you remember what I told you two weeks ago about what it means to be a Christian? This is what I said: "To be a Christian is to know that you have failed and to know to whom you can turn for restoration and forgiveness, Jesus, the Son of God, our Lord and our Saviour."

To know that you have failed, that there are at least some areas of your life, that are empty, even though you wish they weren't, and to be honest with God, yourself, and others that you have failed is the first prerequisite for being a Christian. To admit that you have not loved God with all that you are and that you have not loved your neighbour as yourself.

And the second is that, knowing you have failed, you also know that God in Christ is "steadfast in love and infinite in mercy; He welcomes sinners -- failures -- and invites them to his table". All those people gathered around Jesus, listening, were people who knew that they needed to be there, because at some point, they had failed or that the society around them had failed or that in some sense things were not as they were supposed to be.

My dad was a good man, but he also knew that there were areas in his life where he had failed. He didn't mask them; he turned to Jesus for forgiveness and for a new life.

To be a Christian is to do just that, and that is what it means to be a saint. To be a saint is not someone who lives an exceptional life that all admire, because the people who are living exceptional lives are the first to tell you that there's nothing exceptional about them. It's the actors, the hypocrites, who want you to see their exceptional life.

- No, a saint knows how rarely she really hungers and thirsts for righteousness.
- A saint knows just how often he fails in his heart to show mercy to someone who has failed
- A saint knows how impure his heart really is and that there is always envy, and jealousy, and malice there.

- A saint knows how often she wants vengeance, rather than to say “the peace of the Lord be with you”
- A saint is not one who just says about someone who is in need or dying “I feel your pain”, but someone who truly does feel the pain and stays and goes through the pain, and yet knows even then how little she has done for her friend, for her husband, for her son.... A saint is not someone who is suffering or dying who says to others “Oh, it’s OK”, but who acknowledges the pain and the suffering and seeks God’s healing for it.

A hypocrite would deny it all, and make it look like nothing is wrong. A saint is one who knows just how far he has to go... and yet, knowing all this, is not crushed by it, but turns to God in Christ and cries out: “Lord, help me. I can’t do it myself. Come into my life, Lord Jesus, strengthen me and show me how to go forward.”

That’s what all the saints of all times have always done. And all the saints of all time have found that at the right time, God has come to their aid.

This morning, on this feast of All Saints, I want to extend an invitation to all the saints. I want to extend an invitation to all those who know that there are areas of your life that you have succeeded in but that there are also areas of your life where you recognize that you have failed. I want you to come to the altar this morning to recognize this and to feed on the mercy and grace of the one who gave Himself for us in our need.

It is as saints – not as the perfect – that we gather at the altar, under the shadow of the cross, and remember that we are there not because we first loved and served God but because God first loved and served us, in Christ, giving Himself in Christ as a perfect atonement for the sins of the whole world, for our sins and for us saints.

ⁱ The very rare exceptions were like the “Red Swede” in Sinclair Lewis’s novel “Main Street”. For the most part the exceptions were confined to novels.

ⁱⁱ The “wealth” was not so much monetary as it was the more intangible (for Westerners) notion of “honour”.