

“The Everyday, Ordinary, Common Kind of Saint”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Matthew 5:1-12

Living in a culture of celebrity, it’s easy to feel overlooked and forgotten and, therefore, inferior and unimportant. The media occasionally do “fluff” pieces on slow news days that feature “ordinary” people, or interviewers prowl the sidewalks seeking the viewpoint of the “common man,” but by and large the focus stays on an elite few: the famous and the notorious, like political leaders, sports heroes, and Hollywood stars. Most of the time, we’re very grateful for that, living in relative anonymity.

Yet within each of us lay the subtle insecurity of a two-year-old, more or less tamed by maturity, but a potent force nonetheless. Despite our denial, we desperately want people to pay attention, to notice us, because being noticed gives us a sense of being valued and worthy. It’s easy to see this motive in children, because it takes time to learn the subtle arts of camouflage. Children often misbehave to garner attention. Being noticed is an intense desire, a vital need. All human beings know deep down that what makes us human is our connection with other people, and when we’re ignored, we don’t feel that sense of connection.

I think we do a good job of noticing each other at St. Luke’s, and generally for the right reasons. This is not a church addicted to scandal or plagued by vicious conflicts or gossip, nor do we obsess over politically-charged issues, polarizing into opposite camps of equal self-righteousness. Our ability to avoid these distractions, by the grace of God, enables us to focus our energies on more important matters, like noticing each other in compassionate, kind ways. It takes time, a great deal of patience, and a humble heart to truly notice another human being: too

listen to them and see them for who they are. But we work on it here, and like good cheese or wine we're improving as time goes on.

This ordinary stuff is what sainthood is made off. We might think differently, especially today. In fact, it's easy to be convinced that sainthood lies in extraordinary actions, and we do identify a limited number of people with the official title of "Saint." There are the saints of the Bible, like Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter, who reveal the raw truth about Jesus. Then there are saints who came in the centuries afterwards, like Augustine, Chrysostom, Anselm, and Origen. You may not be familiar with them, but Rev. Shelley and I are from seminary, and we're gradually recovering from that experience. They give us greater understanding about what those biblical saints were trying to tell us. There are also saints like Anthony of the Desert and Benedict of Nursia and Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, who teach us how to pray, offer us a balance of the intellectual and the intuitive, the analytical and mystical. And, of course, we honor people like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Calcutta and Martin of Atlanta, who show us how to live with courage and dignity and compassion and peace, so that others may receive the opportunity to do the same.

Without doubt, each person just named, along with hundreds and thousands more, did amazing things, often at great personal cost. But I still contend that ordinary stuff is what sainthood is made of. The ordinary activities of noticing and remembering are a greater grace than any intellect or intuition or inspiration. And what we find, beneath and behind the awesome miracles and amazing insight of these official saints, is a group of attentive people, who noticed those who were ignored and remembered those in danger of being forgotten. These saints were rooted in communities that noticed and remembered, and even though some communities often

needed urgent reform, the saints remained faithful, not complacent. People like Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Jan Hus, sought the necessary change in the Church, despite the pain.

The reason that noticing and remembering are so essential to sainthood is that this is what God does. God remembers. God never forgets or ignores any of us. It is God's mindfulness of each individual that keeps us in existence. There is more than a hint of accountability that comes with such divine remembrance for us, and yet the memory of God is a merciful one, a just yet tender memory that treasures us more than we can ever value ourselves. God remembers us, even when all others have forgotten, and that's an often overlooked, undervalued blessing.

God also notices people who go unnoticed by limited, distracted human beings like us. That is what the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are all about. A whole series of people are declared blessed, and what garners our attention is how incredible, how ironic the claims Jesus makes are. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for the sake of Jesus. These seem so ridiculous that we might wonder what planet did Jesus come from? Maybe people who say Jesus was an alien are right after all.

In a society that strives to deny death, how can those who mourn be blessed? We've all heard well-intentioned people say, "Shake it off. Dry those tears. It's OK." But it's not OK when someone you love dies. Proper mourning takes years, years to heal and become whole again. Don't let some emotionally-inhibited slave to our macho culture tell you otherwise. Even when everybody else tires of your tears, God will weep with you, because unlike so many people, terrified by death and unwilling to be reminded of it by your grief, God does not fear death, because He conquered it once and for all through Jesus.

In a world that glorifies war as the best if not only means to solve conflict, how can the peacemakers be blessed? Pacifists are often descried as weak and hopelessly idealistic traitors. Even people who stop far short of pacifism but refuse to pretend that the cruelty of war is in any way glorious are often seen as anti-American. “Love or leave it,” people shout, but democracy, a godly gift is ever there was one, requires dissent and opposition, not groupthink that indulges in fantasy over reality. Not all wars can be justified on Christian principles, but many of those that do qualify should not be fought.

For instance, the Roman occupation of Palestine in the 1st Century met every criteria for modern just war theory, and Jesus could have formed an army to march. In fact, that’s what everybody expected a Messiah to do. But he didn’t. Instead, he did the most counter-intuitive thing imaginable. He violated his own self-interest by surrendering to death on a cross, and he won victory over death. Blessed are the peacemakers, people like Jesus who win the victory without resort to violence.

God notices and remembers those ignored, forgotten, and despised by this world. God values everyone infinitely, but especially those assigned no worth on earth, like the meek, derided in a culture that celebrates pride and arrogance. This kind attention is what holiness is made of. This passionate patient presence – the generous act of simply being with – that is what sainthood is made of.

Practicing that kind of presence will lead us to exciting new realities. We might change a life, including our own. We might change the world. We might do something miraculous yet entirely secret, something simple filled with radical repercussions. Our attention and action, on this All Saints’ feast and on every day, needs to focus on noticing, remembering, attending,

valuing each other – and not just ourselves, but all of God’s children, all God’s creatures. For this has no moral ambiguity. It is simply and wholly good, and saintly. Amen.