



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 2, 2014
ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Which Saint Will You Be? Matthew 5:1-12; I John 3:1-3

Every few years on All Saints Sunday, either the congregation or our children's choir will sing that delightful Episcopal hymn, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." Those of you who have crossed over from our sister church know it well and if the rest of you don't, once you hear it, you can never forget it. The tune is lilting and uplifting, a perfect melody for celebrating lives that are important to us. The words, lyrical and a bit playful, remind us that, in the heart of God, all believers are saints—holy ones, to use biblical lingo.

I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green:
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping, to be one too.

They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
and God's love made them strong;
and they followed the right, for Jesus' sake,
the whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast:
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,
why I shouldn't be one too.¹

I love this hymn because Lesbia Scott chose words to describe the saints that are familiar to us: patient, brave, true, strong . . . living, fighting, dying, loving. The list of saints includes people we know—a doctor, a soldier, a priest. Granted, few of us personally know a shepherdess, a queen, or anyone killed by "a fierce, wild beast," but we know of them. And the important fact is that saints run the gamut of people the world over. Finally,

¹Lesbia Scott, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," 1929.

Ms. Scott reminds us that we run into saints in the most ordinary of places: in school, in lanes, at sea, in church, in trains, in shops, at tea.

The brilliance of this hymn is that it identifies true saints as generally ordinary people who are faithful followers of Christ. They are “holy ones” by biblical standards. These are lowercase “s” saints. There are no Vatican Commissions, no papal declarations, not even evidence of miracles. These folks are like us. These saints are the ones whose lives we celebrate today.

Jesus set forth his own particular standards for ordinary sainthood in what we know as The Sermon on the Mount. Speaking to thousands of regular folks gathered on the hillside, he lifted up characteristics which many of them possessed but never thought of as a blessing from God, much less a trait considered saintly. Yet that is the beauty and wonder of the Good News revealed in Jesus Christ. It is not always the extraordinary that sets us apart; rather, it is the ordinary way in which we live out our faith that marks us as the children of God. Listen to what he said:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12

Instead of honoring those religious leaders who appeared to be spiritual giants, Jesus offered blessing to the people who were poor in spirit. They

were the ones who recognized their need for God and were serious about nurturing their faith in God.

Rather than pointing to people for whom all of life appeared to be sweetness and light, Jesus opened his arms to the people who mourned, whose willingness to love made them vulnerable to hurt. Jesus knew from experience that an open heart is wounded as love is shared.

Living in a land occupied by a foreign army and constantly berated by religious leaders who flaunted their self-assigned authority, Jesus recognized the people who were meek. Far from being cowering, spineless wimps, he knew that the meek of the earth were the people who knew themselves and did not have to pretend they were something they were not. They recognized the gifts they possessed and made use of God's blessings. The meek were comfortable in their own skin and had no need to long for the trappings of someone else's life. They were content with whom God had created them to be.

Jesus also saw in that crowd people who were dissatisfied and unhappy with injustice and wrongdoing. They held a passion for seeing that everyone was treated fairly and no one was abused by power or profit. Jesus referred to this virtue as a hunger and thirst for righteousness which sought justice for all people.

Jesus looked around and saw in some of the people on that hillside the strength of compassion that goes beyond empathy to transformative forgiveness. Long understood as a core trait of God, mercy toward another human being is a gift that is redemptive in every way, where one's failings are changed by God's grace and new life is made possible. There were people in that crowd whom Jesus knew to be merciful.

There were also folks there who were extraordinary in their ordinariness. Jesus recognized their purity of heart, not always because of what they did, but often because of what they did not do. They did not press their own desires on other people. They did not perpetuate rumors or speculate about motives. They did not judge other people nor ignore the ramifications of wrongdoing. They did not envy their neighbors or bemoan their own fate. They did not wish ill for anyone or blame others for their lot in life. They understood that life is a gift and opened their eyes each morning to a world of possibilities and closed them again each night grateful to have shared the wonder of the day.

The peacemakers were an easy group to spot for they were surrounded by people whom they had befriended and taught to be friends. They were jovial though serious minded, playful yet vigilant against the kinds of divisions that bring discord and enmity.

And there were the people who suffered because of their efforts to do what is right. He could see in the crowd people who had stood up for others who were being mistreated and soon felt the heat of displeasure turned on them. He could tell who had been offended by false accusations and wounded by friends who became enemies. He sensed the loneliness and fatigue in the ones who bore the brunt of their goodness and the pain of their efforts to live out the Gospel.

There on that hill, thousands of saints sat before Jesus, eager to hear about the path to better life, the rewards of faithful living, and the examples of Godliness which they might exemplify. Instead, Jesus suggested that they look around at their neighbors and recognize that each and every one of them was already blessed, already gifted, already equipped for the life of faith. Jesus helped them to understand that in God's family, they were all saints if they lived their ordinary lives with ordinary faith, an extraordinary challenge to be sure.

In the monastic tradition, it is common for a man or a woman entering a holy order to take on the name of a saint of the church, desiring to take on the particular characteristics of faith that individual possessed. We see this practice most often when a new pope is chosen and selects a new name. Thus Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio chose the name of St. Francis of Assisi who was known for his wide compassion and simplicity of life. By the way, before he entered seminary, Pope Francis was a chemist and a nightclub bouncer. Talk about saintly ordinariness!

If you were to choose a life to emulate, which saint would you choose? If you over this congregation, you will discover that the people around you possess the very spiritual gifts Jesus celebrated with thousands of people on the hillside long ago. They are the gifts our friends who died this past year possessed. They are the gifts God has given to each of us.

None of us is perfect and most of us have a long way to go and a lot to learn, but we have been given gifts like spiritual poverty, vulnerability, compassion, forgiveness, a desire for justice, and a passion for peace. We are the people Jesus calls to follow him. We are the saints of God, the holy

ones blessed with the privilege of bearing Good News in the world. The final stanza of Ms. Scott's hymn is prophetic:

They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.²

We are surrounded by a host of saints. We are the saints of God so let us rejoice and live like it! Amen.

²Scott.

All Saints Homily
November 2, 2014

It is not uncommon at weddings for there to be candles lit or flowers placed in memory of family members who have died. Last Sunday, as our niece was married, my mother-in-law was given a white rose to hold throughout the ceremony in remembrance of her husband, the grandfather of the bride, who died many years ago.

It is not unusual to remember loved ones who are no longer with us, but something about this tradition loomed large for me. In this case, it was his granddaughter who wanted to honor his life, a young woman two generations removed from him who had met him only in stories and pictures passed down in the family.

I was reminded that loved ones who die live on in our lives. People who have lived before us continue to impact our lives even when we have never personally met them. Their character, their values, and their personalities (complete with notable qualities as well as irritating quirks) are handed down as gifts to those of us who follow. And we are the better for it.

Today we remember a group of saints whom we did know. A year ago, even a few weeks ago, they walked among us. Today they dwell with us in memories and experiences that will never be taken away. We rejoice that their faith is fulfilled and they continue to thrive in the full presence of God. We miss them, but we are eternally grateful to God for having known them and shared life with them.

Be assured that somewhere down the course of time, candles and flowers, tears and laughter and prayers of gratitude will be offered by people who never knew these children of God except through the witness that we offer. It is God's gift that not only did we know these friends but we have the privilege of keeping their memory alive.

Today we celebrate the lives of those members of our congregation whose light still shines brightly in our lives and whose intrinsic beauty continues to blossom within us. We miss them for they were an important part of our lives and the life of this church. We ache for their families for we understand the pain of grief and the longing of sorrow. We also rejoice in their lives which were well lived among us and in the gift of eternal life which is now their blessing.

As a family of faith, we speak the names of these our beloved sisters and brothers and light candles in their memory. We have not forgotten them nor have we forgotten those who continue to love them.

Jean Bishop

Thomas Bishop

Faye Conner

Catherine Cooper

Doug Daniel

Ed Hamlet

Gaylord Lehman

Tom Matthews

Leon Robertson

Tommy Tuttle

Charles Wilkerson

We remember family members who have died in the past year.

We remember friends who have died in the past year.

We remember those who died in years past and are still dear to us.

God grant them all eternal rest and light everlasting. Amen.

You are invited to come forward during the singing of the anthem and light a candle in memory of a loved one from your circle of friends or family, especially if the death has occurred during the past year.

You may also light a candle for someone who died years ago, but whose memory is still bright for you. Deacons will be at the head of the center aisle to provide candles, light them, and help you place them on the altar.

November 2, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who is the creator of life and the giver of every good gift which fills our lives, we have gathered in this place to worship you. We acknowledge, Holy God, that though we experience moments of loneliness and doubt, evidence of your goodness and grace fill and surround us at every turn: in crisp, colorful autumn days; in the loving faces of family and friends; in the words and music which stir our souls; in the gathering of community for work and worship and play; and in our prayerful solitude. Make yourself known to us now as we seek to follow you. Help us to move beyond the convenient boundaries of our lives to touch the lives of others. Teach us your perfect will and guide us in the path of righteousness. Speak peace to our restless minds, so that your ways become our ways and Christ's call our fervent desire.

As we gather to offer gratitude for your many gifts to us, Generous God, we are especially grateful for the great cloud of witnesses that has preceded us in the faith. On this day of celebration and remembrance, we praise you for those faithful men and women whose lives have given witness to the example and teachings of Christ, who have worked for the causes of peace and justice in our world. We give thanks for those who have endured suffering for the sake of your kingdom and without thought of their own gain. We offer our gratitude for those whose diligence and wisdom have paved the way for us and whose sacrifices have eased the toil of our journey. From their example of faith and selflessness, may we learn to love you with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the name of the Christ who gives us abundant life for today and hope for all our days to come we make this and all our prayers. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards
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