

So, You Want to be a Saint...

Matthew 5:1-12

All Saint's is one of my favorite days in the life of the church. A chance to remember the saints – not the “big name” saints that have their own individual feast days – the other ones – those who lived quieter, less noticeable lives. In the early church this was often the Local saints – the people who shaped the life of a particular community. Over the years we've also developed the practice of remembering the recent saints – the people who have passed from a the local church and community in the living memory of those assembled for worship – the kind of people that many wouldn't think of as “Saints” at all, but whose lives pointed to God, allowed a little bit of God's light to enter the world at least in one small time or place.

This morning, I am going to try something I've always wanted to try my hand at. I am going to pretend that I am the Pope.

I had better explain. I don't mean that I'm going to put on a pointy hat and preach to you from the balcony! What I mean is that I want to do something that is specifically associated, at least in the Catholic Church, with the Papal office: especially the last occupant of that office, John Paul II – I want to pretend that I'm part of the process by which the Pope participates in the "creation" of new saints. I used the word "participates" because it's not accurate to say that the Pope creates saints all by himself. Nor, for that matter, is it really accurate to say that the church "creates" a saint; rather that the church tries to acknowledge on earth those whom God has already acknowledged as saints in heaven.

This is a process that I have watched from afar with, I must confess, a little bit of envy. Not because I would necessarily want to replicate the Catholic approach to the saints lock, stock and barrel, but because I don't think we Protestants do nearly enough to acknowledge and to celebrate our saints.

That is what I want to do this morning. Not by presuming to name anyone as a saint, but by taking the far more humble step of nominating a small handful of people who, for me at least, have been saints.

Personal Saints

Nick Vangeloff – the junior high music teacher who convinced me that I could sing.

Jim Craig – the accountant co-worker of my dad who taught high school Sunday School in the church I grew up with and put up with rowdy teenage boys and their impertinent questions.

Suzanne Seaton – the campus minister who helped me re-claim my faith in during my time in graduate school and who continues to be an anchoring spiritual presence in my life.

There is a tendency in the way we talk about saints, and the way we tend to put them on pedestals, as we do "celebrities" today, to treat them as almost superhuman. In the early church there was a tradition of writing hagiographies – stories that focus on the wise things they've said, the wonders they did. There are good things about that, mind you. It's good to remember the things that people do that are inspiring and miraculous, the times when we see the full power of God at work in a human being's life.

But there can be a danger in that as well. When we treat saints like this - as inaccessible and "other" - we can make them seem so divine that they can seem less than human. And we when do that we can miss the real challenge their lives bring us – the challenge to be like them, to follow their example. In in the process we can forget, or at least get in the habit of overlooking, the way that God in ordinary human lives. Human lives like ours - human lives like the ones Jesus describes in the Gospel.

This list we read earlier which we call the Beatitudes describes God's idea of greatness - and I think it still has the power to shock us. After all, we are still immersed in a world which idolizes strength, beauty, intelligence and capability. We are taught to imitate lives of people who are successful, prosperous, who have it all together.

But Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Jesus says, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. " Blessed are the meek, those who long for the world to be healed and righted; those who don't demand vengeance but seek mercy and make peace; those who are persecuted and put down - these are the ones whom God calls blessed – happy, fortunate

That's another challenge of this passage, by the way. The Greek word Matthew uses here – Makarios – doesn't translate all that cleanly into English. If you look at different English translations you'll see several different options – Blessed, Happy, Fortunate. Makarios means all of those things. Basically, Jesus is saying it's good when you're poor in spirit, meek, persecuted, etc.

It is a very upside down list - it largely features those who are having a hard time of it, those who are failing or being crushed by life. It is not a list of those most likely to succeed and have the world at their feet. It is not an attractive list - I don't want to be poor in spirit, mournful and meek. I don't want to suffer injustice and persecution. If I did feel like this I would feel anything but blessed. There have been times when I have experienced some of these things, and I was pretty eager to stop experiencing them. This list would have come as a great surprise to many of Jesus' hearers, who equated health and wealth with the favor of God. If you were poor, persecuted, meek, if bad things happened to you, this was a sign that you had displeased God rather than been blessed by him.

And much though we might like to think we have changed, if you have ever been poor, or suffered some difficult bereavement or some kinds of ill health, particularly mental ill health, you will probably have been painfully aware of the stigma which still attaches to these things.

Cause you see, it isn't just that it's hard for us to experience hardship, it's hard for others to experience it with us. So we avoid it. Casual acquaintances avoid you and can't meet your gaze. Even friends sometimes become uncomfortable. We often feel a deep sense of guilt and shame which is wholly unjustified. Often people say to me "I must have done something to deserve this." They haven't, but that is how it feels. They almost never say "I must have done something to be blessed with this"!

But Jesus says that it is when you know poverty, grief, trouble, that you are blessed. The blessing he refers to is not some sort of heavenly consolation prize for having had a rough time on earth. Nor is he saying that we should deny the sheer wretchedness we feel when we are in the midst of difficulties.

What he is saying is that in these stretched and broken lives God can be at work in ways that are impossible when we feel strong and successful. That is what true blessing is - having God at work in you.

Only when you are poor in spirit - not full of yourself, comfortable in your own strength - will you be able to receive the riches of God's kingdom. Only when you truly let yourself mourn will God be able to comfort you. Only when you realize that the world - including yourself - needs mercy, righteousness and peace can God begin to take your longing and satisfy it.

We tend to think that it is when we are on top of life - full of faith and joy, sorted out - that we are most saintly - people of whom God is proud and to whom others can look up. But God's view is the other way around. It is the times when we are cracked and broken, hungry and thirsty, struggling and striving, feeling like nobodies with nothing to offer, that he can find a way past our self sufficiency and plant new life within us.

That's how it was for Jesus, who is talking just as much about his own life as he is about ours. He was broken, he was frightened, he was in the dark, he was treated like nobody - and it was in this, not despite it, that we find the blessing he came to bring - the knowledge of God's presence in the world bringing hope from despair and life from death.

There is a story – one of those “pastor” stories that has been floating around so long that no one seems to know exactly where it came from anymore - about a young boy went with his parents touring around Europe one summer. Part of their tour included visits to the great old cathedrals of the past. As he visited cathedral after cathedral he was impressed the massive stained glass portraits of the disciples and of other saints as he stood in their great empty halls looking through the beautiful stained glass windows. Upon returning home, he was asked by his school teacher about the trip, and what he liked the most. He thought for a moment of those great churches and their grand windows and he said, “I loved the stained glass windows with the pictures of the saints.”

“And what is a saint?” his teacher asked. His mind went back to those beautiful windows and he said, “A saint is a person the light shines through.”

We've gotten wrong idea about holiness. We've absorbed the notion that to be holy is to be superhuman, above the problems of the world, separate and apart from its trials and struggles, set apart – sort of floating above, it's fear and pain. The truth, I think, is just the opposite. Holiness – at least the way Jesus describes it, is about being more human not less - real flesh and blood people with all the vulnerability that that implies, just as God intended us to be.

Holiness is not some special status reserved for others - it is part of our destiny and calling. The call to find God deep at work within our humanity, and to discover the blessing that lies within even our brokenness. To let God's light shine through even in the darkest moments of our lives.

And the people who do that – in ways large and small? The Bible calls them the saints. Not because they are perfect. Not because they never made a mis-step. Not because at the end of their lives God added up their score and found out that their good deeds outnumbered their bad ones. Not even because they have earned a crown in heaven in eternity – but because their lives gave other a glimpse of God's kingdom.

They let the light shine through.

And so we gather this day to remember and give thanks for the saints of this community – both those who have shaped its past and those who animate its present – as we re-commit ourselves to be the community of saints for tomorrow.

In a world that tells us to seek the spotlight, we choose to let the light through. In a world that tells us to fear or even hate our neighbors, we pledge to love. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.