

Wounded Saints (10/27/19)

Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

Sermon

Good morning. Today we celebrate All Saints' Day. This is a recognition of all the saints in our lives, particularly the everyday saints, the people who have walked with us, taught us, guided us, and shaped us along our faith journeys. This is all the saints, living and dead. Of course, today, we offer you the chance to light a candle in honor of a saint in your life who has left this world.

You might be surprised to hear this, but there's a lot of talk about saints at the cigar shop. It usually goes something like this: "Have you ever met Jeff's wife? She's a saint." To which another guy responds, "she'd have to be, for putting up with Jeff." There's even one guy, a loud, Irish Catholic who grew up in Brooklyn, who says that *he's* a saint for putting up with his wife—though we all know it's the other way around. In other words, a saint is someone who suffers a long time for some higher purpose.

Another common image of sainthood is found in the life of someone who seems impossibly holy, like Mother Teresa. In the Roman Catholic Church, a person can only be made a saint after they've died, and then the church convenes a panel to assess whether or not that person should be recognized as a saint. One of the criteria is that the person must have performed a miracle *after* his or her death.

All of which seems a bit excessive to my Reformed, Protestant way of thinking. Yet I believe that we've all inherited this line of thinking to some extent. We have too high a notion of sainthood. The word saint actually comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, which itself comes from the Greek word *hagios*, which means holy, or set apart.

The early Christian communities were very much set apart from the rest of Greco-Roman society. They believed in one God and one God, only. They believed that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and at the same time *was* God. That was very different from the rest of the world. They were set apart from most of the rest of society, which believed in the existence of many, many gods.

Furthermore, many of those early followers were Jewish. In their minds, they didn't stop being Jews—the name Christian came into use a couple of generations after Jesus was crucified. Yet their belief that Jesus was the Messiah and the son of God set them apart from all of the other Jews.

The Letter to the Ephesians begins with the following greeting: “To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In fact, most of the Apostle Paul's letters to congregations begin with some variation on that theme: Grace and peace to the saints at Rome, or Corinth, or Colossae. They are set apart because they are

in Christian community together. They are *all* saints. In the same way, *we* are *all* saints and sinners at the same time.

I think that notion is much more in line with Paul's thinking, but something was lost in the translation from Greek to Latin to English. Similarly, something was lost in the movement from small Christian communities and house churches to the large power structure of the Roman Catholic Church. I think it's helpful that we restore the more common notion of sainthood through the celebration of All Saints' Day.

Something is also lost in translation in our reading from the Gospel of Luke. When we hear the words "blessed" and "woe," we don't hear them as the crowds who heard Jesus would have heard them. The Greek word *makarios* is translated as "blessed," but it could just as easily be translated as "happy" or "satisfied" or "unburdened."¹ Let's listen to some of those verses again.

Satisfied are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Unburdened are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Happy are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

That doesn't sound very happy or satisfying to me. They sound like great burdens to me. Yet this is the nature of Jesus' message in Luke's Gospel.

¹ Matt Skinner, "Commentary on Luke 6:20-31," retrieved from: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4256

Remember, in the first chapter, Mary after she learns that she is pregnant and carrying the son of God offers a song of praise:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

This idea that the poor and lonely people of the world will be uplifted through Jesus, through the incarnation of the Word of God. Jesus’ words echo Mary’s song of praise. Jesus promises comfort for those who are hurting.

However, there is a danger in overreading the “woes” in this passage. “Woe” merely serves as a contrast to “blessed;.”² It focuses our attention, but it should never be translated as “unhappy,” “cursed,” or “damned.”³ The word “woe” is a signal to those of us who are happy in this world, those of us who have material advantages, to pay attention to those who do not. It’s a reminder of the distance between the haves and have-nots of this world.

Let’s face it, most of us enjoy a great deal of comfort, and yes, most of us have a lot of spiritual gifts and blessings. Yet we often fail to see our spiritual or material wealth. I know a lot of doctors, lawyers, and other business professionals who make six-figure incomes. But if you ask them about their wealth, they’ll say, “I’m middle class.” If you push further, they’ll say, “Hey, do you know what a house goes for around here? Do you know how much my property taxes are?”

And yes, I understand those things. I’m not criticizing any of you who have done well. Even I struggle with questions of how much I should give to the church. My excuses for not doing more are my rent, my student loans, and my car payment. When we compare ourselves to people who seem to have more than we do, we let ourselves off the hook. We see the burden of caring for those who are on the margins as someone else’s problem. We don’t see how our wealth separates us from others.

² Skinner.

³ Skinner.

In the same way, when we see others as more holy or more saintly, we fail to acknowledge our own spiritual wealth. We think that we're not up to the task. We want to leave the work to Saint Eleanor of Hargis or some other saint of this congregation, because we don't have enough to give. And that just ain't so!

What's more, when we expect saints to be perfect people of perfect faith, we fail to see the saints around us, many of whom have been broken by the world.

I want to close this sermon with a story. Right before I went to seminary, I had the best job I'd ever had. My boss was a guy named Sean. I would guess that he was a lapsed Catholic, but he never said anything about religion or faith. At his worst, Sean was moody, distant, and a bit of a mother hen. He had a tendency to micromanage us when we approached a deadline on a project. Occasionally, he would explode on one of us, and then over-apologize for his transgressions. And yet, we all loved Sean.

Despite his distance, Sean took an active interest in the lives of all of his coworkers. He got to know each and every one of us, he cared about us, but he rarely let us get close to him.

While I was at that job, I went on a mission trip to Nicaragua. It was a major step in my faith journey; those experiences shaped my sense of call to the ministry. But I this wasn't something that I was willing to share on the job.

Every month, I had a check-in with Sean, a career conversation, as he called it. We would talk about any open issues that weren't related to specific projects, where I wanted to go with the company, and what sorts of training I might need to get there. All of that changed when I told Sean that I was thinking of going to the seminary. The conversation was supposed to last thirty minutes. We talked for an hour-and-a-half that morning.

Sean was fascinated by my decision and it was more than his usual interest. He then told me that he had often thought about leaving the corporate world and getting more involved in church and exploring his faith more deeply. You could have knocked me over with a feather. I had no idea that Sean was a person of faith. It was one of many, many things that he kept to himself.

From that day on, our career conversations were about my decision to go into the seminary, my faith, and where I wanted to go in my ministry. I was amazed by Sean's generosity. These conversations always ran at least an hour, sometimes longer, and they had nothing to do with work or the company. He gave me his time when he could have been focusing on company business.

Talking to Sean really helped me to refine my sense of call. He was incredibly supportive as I applied to the seminary and he shared in my joy when I was accepted. That was in June of 2011. Two months later, Sean passed away. He was 40.

I realize now that if I had not shared my faith journey with Sean, I never would have known of his faith, nor would I have received his support as I moved forward on my journey. I never would have thought to name him a saint. Sean was an imperfect person, as am I, as are we all.

I'm not holding myself or Sean up as candidates for sainthood. I offer this story as an example of what may happen when we let down our guard, when we open ourselves up to the grace of the people around us. May we all become more aware of our own spiritual blessings and more aware of the ways in which we separate ourselves from others. And through this awareness, may we reach out to all the broken and imperfect saints in this congregation and in the world outside of our walls, so that we may share our blessings and be blessed by others. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

Now, beloved, as you depart from this place, remember to look for all the wounded and broken saints in our midst. Then, go forth and be instruments of God's peace and love and reconciliation. Do not return evil for evil to any person, but know that we are all loved by God, and that we are called to reflect that love to everyone we meet. Go forth and be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, let all God's children say, **Amen!**