

Humble, Happy Saints

A sermon on Matthew 5:1-12

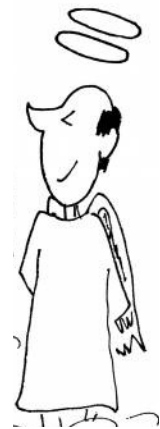
for All Saints Sunday November 5, 2017

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Part I: Accepting the notion of “Sainthood”

Today we celebrate All Saints Day, a day set aside in the church calendar, originally to honor all those lesser saints whose names weren't even known, and sure didn't have their own feast day like some of the bigger names, like Saint Francis, Saint Benedict, Saint Patrick, Saint Nicholas...It was a way of acknowledging that there are a lot of saints that we don't know about, people who had the humble thing down so well that they didn't attract the notice of anyone who didn't know them personally. In the Protestant world, All Saints tends to be the only day when we talk about saints...ever, and to most of us, practically *everyone* who was ever declared a saint is unknown to us, aside from a few really important ones. We tend to be more comfortable thinking of saints as ordinary people doing their best.

Now, I don't know how you all feel about the topic of “saints.” I know I tend to be a little cynical about humanity. The very thought of anyone being “perfect” sounds suspect if not downright delusional, and I tend to get either the image in my head of the “holier than thou” type or of the jerk that has family who make overblown exaggerations about how great this person was when he dies. As for actual canonized saints such as recognized in the Catholic Church, a lot of their stories focus on the miraculous and read like fiction.



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The School of Theology I've been at the past few years has midday prayer every Thursday where all the students, faculty, and staff worship together. Typically, because there are a significant number of Protestant students at what is a Catholic school, it is very seldom that the Virgin Mary or any of the saints came into play during Thursday Convivium, as we call it. There are exceptions, and one of them must have been around Epiphany or something like that - there was snow on the ground, not that that narrows down the time frame much in Minnesota. But we had a processional around campus, blessing the ground with holy water and calling on a long litany of saints. It was one of those events that I usually would have bowed out of, but for some reason I decided to go along with it.



I made something of a spiritual breakthrough that day, because as this litany of saints was being read off, I realized that these names were familiar. These were the names of early Christian bishops, monks, martyrs, and theologians whom through my studies I had learned about and read their writings. These saints were people I felt like I knew. You ever read a book or watch a movie and start to feel like you know the characters and maybe even the writer? It was sort of like that. Except more. These were individuals that shaped my own faith and inspired me to grow spiritually. They were all people I knew were devoted to Christ. And I was really thankful to have gotten to know them as it were.



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I guess what I realized is that there are folks well worth remembering, folks who show us what it is to be serious about this religion of ours. And it has nothing to do with being “holier than thou.” On the contrary, these saints had lives based in humility, as healthy spiritual life is. They sure weren’t chasing after glory. Rather, they lived what Christ was talking about in the Beatitudes.



Part II: The Beatitudes, or What is Happiness?



This is one of those passages that can get so familiar that we don’t really hear them. It is easy to nod along and just be comforted by familiar words. But these words sound like those of a lunatic. The word that gets translated as “blessed” - the Greek is *markarios* - can mean fortunate, lucky, or happy, a happiness that bubbles up from within, a type of attitude where nothing can get you down. I think that is what a lot of people seek in life, but something that is hardly ever ascribed to the poor and the meek, to those who mourn, or are persecuted, or are reviled and and slandered. And even those who are pure in heart and the peacemakers aren’t often thought of as “fortunate.” Ever hear the phrase nice guys finish last? The world thinks little of weak, the naive, the idealist and others who don’t follow along with how the “real world” works.

...And it’s true enough, unless that isn’t really the “real world.”

Christ invites us to a different worldview and different priorities. A way of thinking and being in this world that allows one to be happy regardless of what is thrown their way, even through dejection, poverty, and mourning. All of these attributes are blessed, **when they are put in relationship with God**. Otherwise, as one of those early Saints I’m so fond of said, “surely these people are miserable.” We are not just talking about the poor, but the poor in spirit, that is those who have *chosen* a simple life out of humbleness

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of spirit. We are not talking about those who hunger and thirst after their own desires, that tends to only make us a slave to ourselves, but those who seek what is right and good, and become a slave to God. We are not talking about just anyone who is persecuted and reviled and slandered, because that still is a horrible thing to go through. We are talking about those who are treated this way because they put God before themselves, who stand firm in their faith even when it is dangerous, as so many of the martyrs did, and still do.



The Christian life, the way of the Saints, the way of Christ himself is not always an easy life, but it can be a very happy one. One in which the worst of circumstances provides purpose instead of despair. Even in mourning, there is comfort and hope. It is a life that puts us in positions where we strive to be peacemakers and to have purity of heart. We give up some of our own desires in preference of what God would have us do. We do this knowing that it often leads to persecution and being reviled. But even in that, we are blessed, and we can be happy. Because our happiness doesn't come from what people see or say regarding us. It comes from God and the knowledge that we serve him.

*Now to the One
who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly
than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church
and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.*