

In Gratitude

sermon digest

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Matthew 5:5-12

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So how about it? Have you been to pick up your Halloween candy? If you are like us, you purchase a nice big bag of little chocolate bars early and spend several weeks slapping your hands, trying to keep from tearing into them early and indulging. When we lived in Louisville, our little dog Tigg recognized the sound of our opening the pantry door where we kept Halloween leftovers stashed and came running just to get the tiniest little bit.

Halloween, you probably know, has its ancient origins. It goes back to the ancient Celts who incorporated it into their harvest festival when crops were gathered and livestock was slaughtered to get them through the winter. Convinced that on the evening of October 31, the boundary between the living and the dead dissolved and the dead roamed the landscape putting them at risk of sickness and destruction of crops, they built huge bonfires to keep goblins and ghosts away and to burn any witches that might make themselves known. All afternoon, village boys went house to house, collecting pieces of peat or coal to fuel the fire and giving dire warnings to any who did not contribute. Pope Gregory IV “baptized” the festival in 835, inaugurating the observance of All Hallow’s Day, now known as All Saints Day, on November 1. All Hallow’s Eve, the preceding evening, became what we know now as Halloween [Sharon E. Pearson, “All Hallow’s Eve,” Church Publishing Inc.].

If your experience has been similar to mine, you probably have not made much of the religious significance of the season. As a matter of fact, one seminary professor recalls that when he began speaking about saints in one of his classes, one student promptly spoke up, assuring his classmates that Protestants have no saints. With a stroke of genius, the professor briefly stepped to his office, picked up a phone book and began reading off the names of listed churches—St. Andrew’s Baptist, St. John’s Episcopal, St. Thomas Lutheran, etc., etc. The professor made his point, and the student recanted.

The student, however, was only partially misinformed. All Saints Day was retained on the calendar of many Protestant churches, particularly those of English descent. Often observed simultaneously with Reformation Sunday, it has morphed into the celebration of all true Christian believers as saints. It is a day celebrating the great saints of history, including those of the earliest days of the church as well as those of the Reformation; but it is also (and sometimes more so) a time of remembrance and celebration of recently deceased members of one’s own local congregation. It is a time for saying “thank you” for the heritage of faith we enjoy.

So how about you? Are you a saint? Yes, I see you squirming in your seat. I do as well. I’m not sure if it is because we are fearful of claiming too much for ourselves—appropriate modesty, you might say—or if it is because we are fearful of the weight of responsibility that might accompany the label. Whatever the case, the idea of sainthood is not just passé. It can serve us well today, both in the sense of understanding and appreciating our heritage and gaining a better grasp of the implications of discipleship for all of us.

We owe a debt of appreciation to the faithful who have preceded us. A couple of weeks ago, Linda Doyle led us in a Wednesday evening meditation in which she called us to gratitude for our ancestors. Although we may be more aware of the primary role ancestors play in other religions, if ours is a faith commitment centered on something other than our own self-preoccupation, appreciation of the faithful who have gone before us can and should inform and strengthen us.

The book of Revelation often associates the saints with the martyrs. Written in a time when Christians were regularly faced with the choice of recanting their faith and offering incense to the Caesars or death, Revelation, that book that frankly scares us because we have seen it so abused, flows out of an emergency situation. It sees “a great multitude . . . from every nation . . . standing before the throne” of God. These have passed through “the great ordeal,” “the great tribulation,” the great pounding and sifting of persecution [7:9-15]. Reminiscent of the professed hope embodied in the calling of Abraham as a blessing to the nations and Isaiah’s vision of Israel as a light to the nations, the throng of the faithful represents every nation, every tribe, every language. Tormented in their lifetime, these now stand in final victory, vindicated by God.

In like manner, the writer of Hebrews recalls the great heroes of the faith who “suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—of

whom the world was not worthy” [11:36-38]. Yet these, the writer assures us, were not complete apart from us and our faithfulness. They surround us now, like a great cloud of witnesses, like spectators in the athletic stadium, cheering us on that we might “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” [12:1].

Far from isolated in this moment in time, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. Whether they were among the “greats” or the small and seemingly insignificant, their faithfulness in their time made the way for our faithfulness in our time. We are not called to repeat history, but we *are* called to know and appreciate and learn from history.

The call to sainthood incorporates us all. Okay, so we are not comfortable with the idea; and we should be clear that we are not seeking here to endorse a pompous, self-serving, self-righteous attitude. If we take the message of Jesus seriously, however, particularly the Sermon on the Mount, we are called to a higher righteousness—again, not a *self*-righteousness, as if that is the only righteousness that is. We are called to serious and responsible discipleship—discipleship that has an urgency to it. We may not live with the threat of deadly persecution experienced in New Testament and in other times and places, but we are called to take our identity as followers of Christ seriously—not as an invitation to simply blend in with the supposedly “Christian” culture that surrounds us.

Paul and other New Testament writers clearly signified the whole body of Christ when they spoke of the saints, and Matthew opens Jesus’ public ministry with the Sermon on the Mount and a call to righteousness that begins with pronouncing God’s blessing upon all who would walk in the way. The beatitudes, Jesus’ first words on that mountain, are familiar to us. As a matter of fact, they are so familiar that, like other beloved passages, they are among “the most dangerous passages in the Bible” because, John Meier suggests,

we do not really listen to them. The sharp stone of God’s Word, smoothed down by the river of time, no longer cuts. Instead of being challenged by hard thought or hard choices, we lean back and savor pretty words. Nine beatitudes, nine spiritual bonbons. No sooner is ‘blessed are the poor . . .’ intoned than eyes become glassy or moist, the heart is strangely warmed, and no one notices that Jesus the revolutionary is heaving a verbal grenade into our homiletic garden [“Matthew 5:3-12, Expository Article,” *Interpretation*, 1990].

The nature of that shocking, revolutionary grenade? It is twofold: First, it blesses those who are not in a position to simply lift themselves by their own boot straps—the poor, the grieving, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice. Putting aside the cherished appearance of dominance and success so valued by society, these, Jesus says, are valued and blessed by God. Add to these the second listing—the merciful, “the pure in heart” (those who serve God with an undivided devotion) and the peacemakers. “Precisely because,” Meier goes on to say, those who follow Jesus’ way refuse to put the ways and goals of the world at the center of their existence,

they have the courage to show God’s mercy, to make God’s peace to ‘do the right thing’ willed by God in the face of persecution. The saving action of God that touches them in Jesus’ beatitudes is also the saving action they are empowered to imitate. Their unlimited love reflects the family resemblance they derive from their heavenly Father.

So, what about you? What about me? Do we bear the family resemblance? Do we in our lives continue the line of faithfulness that we celebrate in the great saints of the ages and have ourselves witnessed in the faithful saints who have nurtured our lives and loved us from the day of our birth?

If indeed our eyes are open, we live in gratitude, knowing that we did not make ourselves. And if we live in gratitude to God and those who have gone before us, we know ourselves commissioned and empowered so also to live. Thanks be to God!