

Who? Me? A Saint?

Preached UCB All Saints Day November 3, 2019

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

Several Sundays ago, the Roman Catholic church canonized five new saints. Which is news that might have easily slipped under the radar for many Protestants. Except that, in his eagerness to celebrate the event, Pope Francis tweeted out the message: *Today we give thanks to the Lord for our new #Saints*. The Pope might be considered infallible in some things, but Francis was obviously ill informed about one thing. Little did he know that #Saints is the official Twitter hashtag for the New Orleans Saints football team.

New Orleans fans have motto that they use for trolling opposing teams - "*Who dat say dey gonna beat dem Saints?*" I don't see that bravado being anything but louder now that there is a Vatican endorsement to back it up. That announcement even prompted one of the team's linebackers to tweet in response, "*Wow, are we blessed or what?!??*"

In the Beatitudes, Jesus has something to say about how blessed saints truly are. Not the football saints from New Orleans. Not even the officially venerated Saints, like St. Francis or St. Peter, who some traditions teach as occupying an exalted place in heaven. When Jesus looked out over his audience and said blessed are *you*...he wasn't looking at a crowd of ultra-holy types. He was looking at a rag tag bunch that included the poor, the hungry, the grieving, and the rejected. Just about everybody you could think of, in other words, that the world would *never call blessed*.

St. Paul addresses the members of the churches to which he writes his epistles, including this morning's reading from Ephesians, as saints. And when you read those epistles and understand Paul's motive for some of what he wrote in them, you'd probably be surprised at the sorts of people *he* called saints. Many of Paul's letters were written to churches that were experiencing turmoil and conflict, who were struggling to be faithful, and who occasionally needed a good old-fashioned scolding because they were not behaving in a very saintly fashion. Despite their imperfections, Paul addressed them *all* as saints, because they were the Church, and the Church is a community of saints.

Which makes us saints, as well! Your reaction to being called a saint might be, "Who dat? Me? A saint?" But, Paul's criteria for sainthood was not based on something you accomplish, but something you *receive* when you hear and respond to the Gospel. He likened it to an inheritance. You don't *earn* an inheritance. You receive it as a gift because of your relationship to the giver. Far from being an honor conferred by any human authority, *saint* is a descriptive word for all those who receive and respond to the gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

The distinguishing mark of a saint is not perfection, but love. Not a mushy, sentimental love. But a tough love. Tough love in the sense that it is not always an easy love to give. It is a love for people that we might never have loving feelings for, but towards whom we are called to act with loving kindness, generosity and compassion, nonetheless. It is love for people who could never or would never return the love you show them. People, who would even call you their enemy; who would strike you on the cheek or take what belongs to you. Simply stated, this love can be expressed in one sentence. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Christianity is all about relationships –relationships with God and with one another. It is through relationship with God that God reveals God’s self to us. And it is through relationships with others that saints are used to reveal God to them. But what saints reveal to the world about God is not always graciously received. The world has little tolerance for saints who set their sights on values and principles that the world does not share. Jesus warned his followers that the world would hate them, exclude them, revile them, and defame them on account of their relationship to him. He pointed out that this was nothing new, but an old, old pattern. It was, after all, exactly how their ancestors had treated the prophets in the past who had tried to open people’s eyes to a life lived for a greater goal than temporary, earthly wealth and power. Yet, the sacrifices and persecutions suffered in the course of their faithfulness, would be offset by the blessings they would receive from God.

Those whom we celebrate on this All Saints Day are ordinary, fallible people who loved their God and their neighbor to the best of their ability. And who prayed to God to help them love the people it was hardest to love with something beyond their own ability. They are a people who set their hope on Jesus and lived for the praise of his glory. In their death, we believe they will inherit the Kingdom of God because they put their faith in the Kingdom of God while they lived. We remember our connection to them, not merely through kinship or friendship, but as fellow followers of Jesus; proclaimers and workers for God’s Kingdom.

Paul prayed for the saints in Ephesus, continually giving thanks for them and remembering them in his prayers. He prayed that they would *increase* in faith and hope and love, because they still had a long, long way to go in those areas. He prayed that they would *grow* in holiness and dedication to God because there is always room to grow in those things, even with saints. He prayed that the eyes of their heart would be enlightened to recognize the hope to which God called them, so that, they too might exclaim, “*Wow, are we blessed or what?!??*”

Paul’s prayer was for the saints in Ephesus, but it is really a prayer for all the saints in all places and all times. Including you, you saints of Westminster. “Who Dat? Me?” you might say. “A saint?” Yes, you. And according to Jesus, ain’t nobody gonna beat dem saints!