

## ***Ordinary Saints, Extraordinary Hope***

Sunday, November 5, 2023

All Saints Day Worship

Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 21: 1-6

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Every church has boxes of old snapshots of the memorable moments of its life. There are albums going back decades, or in some cases, computer files containing hundreds of images. Flip through them and you'll find photos of teenagers from 1992 with frosted-tipped hair on the boys and giant scrunchies on the girls. You'll relive church picnics and Valentine's dinners, choir parties and Christmas cantatas, mission trips and potlucks and all sorts of reminders of years gone by.

These photos are part of our collective memories. Within this church's archives you'll find photographs of a young, dark-haired preacher. If you find him, please let me know. I'd like to see him again!

But you'll also find scads of pictures of children leading Christmas pageants in carefully pressed robes. You'll see people who have made pot after pot after pot of coffee, who have cut more sheet cakes than you can count, and whose acts of service to the church are incalculable. You'll see the grinning faces of some of our saints: those cherished friends who fought the good fight, who finished their race, and who kept the faith.

Our family has inherited a large collection of photo albums. And I know there are many more boxes still waiting to be brought back from California. Looking at these photo albums you might think our name was Kodak or National Geographic. You can easily trace the history of every hair and clothing style from the 1920s to the present time. Long before there was Instagram, there was the Kodak Instamatic, and we have the evidence to prove it.

This is, in part, what the church does on All Saints Day. We open the old photo albums and gaze at the faces. We walk up to the attic, dust off the containers, and laugh once more at the sweaters we wore or the haircuts we had. Our eyes moisten in remembrance of those who have gone ahead of us, even as our hearts give thanks for their loving faithfulness.

Many in their albums are people unknown to us. They are like a large, crumbling album of photos I inherited from my mother. They are nameless, unidentified souls whose stories are unknown to us. We do not know why they are laughing or the purpose for their gathering at church. We do not know their struggles or their successes, their joys or their failures. We look at them like the elders envisioned by John in Revelation, saying "Who are these, and where have they come from?"

We do not know. But they too are held within the unfailing and unfading memory of God. They are the saints who now gather in the church triumphant. The description of the saints in Revelation gives us a sense of hope: a great multitude, which no one can count, crying out together in loud voices, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" They worship, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

They are standing and singing praise to God! If you thought you could skip singing in the church choir on earth, you may have a surprise waiting for you in heaven! Here all God's people have a place in the choir. Their voices resound with praise.

And we hear them. Today their voices are ringing in our hearts and in our memories. Their voices echo the words of Jesus in Matthew 5, and indeed, it is his voice who calls us to follow where they have marched. Jesus invites us to hear them, even as we listen to him describe the pathways God's saint are called to follow. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be children of God."

We might immediately think that the great saints of the world are those whose lives reflect a particular sense of purity and holiness. We think of contemporary saints as people like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Father Maxmillian Kolbe, Archbishop Oscar Romero, the great C.S. Lewis or Dorothy Day. They are our saints, whose voices sing to us from heaven. They are the ones who today cross that thin place between heaven and earth, offering us glimpses of glory.

Indeed, they are the saints whose voices reach us today. But we miss the point, I think, if the only saints we know are those whose amazing lives of faithfulness leave us feeling inadequate or embarrassed. Our lives seem so ordinary, so pedestrian by comparison.

Eugene Peterson remarks that the faith of Christ instills in all of us a call to live resurrection lives. We are being trained, said Peterson, to see ourselves as saints, "not saints in the sense of haloed exception to garden-variety Christians, but simply Christians who realize that Jesus' resurrection places us in a position to live robustly in the world of the Holy, growing up in Christ, practicing resurrection."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus' words in Matthew are not some sort of purity test, not a to-do list of ways to make our lives more holy, but are instead reminders of how God's love is poured out on all creation. Jesus names the blessed as those whom we would regard as the most ordinary. He looks beyond the obvious saints of the world to see instead those who have been rejected by the world.

Indeed: we may be thrilled at the idea of Martin Luther pounding his 95 theses to the church door, seeing it as a great moment of church history. But the real hero of the faith may be the barmaid who served Luther his glass of Wittenberg beer, allowing him a moment of rest. We are blessed by John Calvin's theological vision of the communion of saints, but perhaps the persons who truly shaped church history were those Genevans who listened faithfully to his sermons, whose faithful response to the gospel was formed by the words he proclaimed.

Jesus' words remind us that in the ordinary pursuits of faith, God is calling us to become saints whose lives reflect a gospel that celebrates the forgotten, the ignored, and injured members of Christ's body. Do not forget the everyday contributions of ordinary saints—whose lives were shaped daily by these blessings Jesus describes in Matthew.

It is their witness that we name today. It is the gifts they offered we recall and honor. Early on Sunday mornings, I sometimes walk through these rows, recalling their faces and listening for their laughter. I listen for their lives, and am reminded of God's calling to live, as Paul says in Ephesians, "to the praise of Christ's glory."

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, p. 272

In that old M. Night Shyamalan movie, “The Sixth Sense,” a young Haley Joel Osmet is terrified of the visions he has been having. “I see dead people,” he says to his therapist, played by Bruce Willis. “I see dead people walking around like regular people.”

Perhaps we ought to be on the lookout for dead people as well. I am not saying that the church is to become some sort of haunted house filled with ghosts. But I do believe among us every Sunday are the members of Calvin called the “*communio sanctorum*.” The communion of saints, the famous and the ordinary. “Unless we are united with all the other members,” Calvin wrote, “we can have no hope of the future inheritance.”

This is more than an exercise in nostalgia. The stories of the saints point us back to the ways the gospel transcends nostalgia and pushes forward in hope and service. The communion of saints remind us that the holiness is expressed in meekness, compassion, acts of peace. We are led to see where God is at work in the world, and then are invited to join in that work.

Listen to the extraordinary hope offered by the stories of such ordinary people and be blessed. *Amen.*

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