

Living for Jesus

Ephesians 1:11-23

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 6:20-31

November 6, 2016 All Saints Sunday

Earlier in the service, we honored the memories of those of our fellowship, or related to us, who have died. The sound of the chime, the reading of the name, the silence, gave us the opportunity to recall lives well lived, lives of people dear to us. It's important, I think, not only to remember their deaths, but to remember their lives, as well. I'm going to pause and give us sixty seconds of silence, and I invite you to use the silence to think of a warm and positive memory that you have of one of these people when they were alive and well. Look for memories that bring smiles. I'm not going to ask you to share those memories aloud at this time, but maybe at informal conversation later today, share them with a friend. (set timer—one minute) Please pray with me. Dear God, thank you for the ties that bind us together in Christian love. Thank you for the saints whom we remember today, and for their lives. Amen.

On our Wednesday evening DVD nights, we recently finished watching a movie about the letters of Mother Teresa. It was very inspiring to watch, largely because it let us see the human side of this great woman, who won the Nobel Peace Prize by doing small things with great love. After Mother Teresa passed away, the Roman Catholic Church put her on the fast track to sainthood, and they officially canonized her on September 4. So it's natural that when we think of saints, we think of people like her, or of the gentle and loving St. Francis of Assisi, or of other Christian superstars. Some have died for their faith as martyrs. Others launched new spiritual movements that helped cleanse and renew the church. Others were great missionaries, spreading the Gospel by word and deed.

When the New Testament talks about saints, though, it isn't addressing spiritual superstars. We heard earlier from the 1st chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In many translations, from the King James through the New Revised Standard, Paul calls his audience, the congregation in Ephesus, saints. Here's one example from the NRSV. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, 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." The word for saints in Greek is *hagioi*, which means "holy ones." The version you heard today, says "to the holy and faithful people." Holy means set apart by God; belonging to God. It was an inclusive, not an exclusive, term. Paul addressed many of his letters to the saints at such and such a place, and he was talking not just about the spiritual leaders, but everyone who loved and believed in Jesus Christ. For Christ had made them—as Christ makes us—holy by our baptism. Rich, poor, free, slave, male, female, Jew, gentile, distinctions don't matter.

Paul goes on to lay it on thick. God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing that comes from heaven. God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God’s presence before the creation of the world. God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love.” (1:3b-5) God blessed us. God chose us. God destined us. And that was all before the passage you heard earlier. In that passage, he continues: We have received an inheritance; we were destined by the plan of God; we are called to be an honor to God; we were sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit. Wow. What a buildup. Imagine if you were a servant or scullery maid, Paul is saying that God is doing wonderful things through you that will transform the world. Then he goes on to pray for them (and us); thanking God for them (and us); and affirming that God’s power is working through them (and us), all because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Saints aren’t just in Calcutta or Rome. Saints are people like us, quietly going on living our lives, doing our jobs, loving our families, loving our neighbors, helping the poor, getting along, living for Jesus.

How do we live for Jesus? Jesus himself tells us in words passed on through St. Luke. We’re familiar with the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. We’re less familiar with another set of beatitudes that we heard earlier, from Luke 6. They overlap in some ways. They both talk about being happy, or blessed. Whenever I go to the supermarket nearest our house, I like to get in the line of one check-out clerk. She asks me how I am, and when I ask her how she is, she grins and says, “I’m blessed.”

According to Jesus, poor people are happy, because God’s Kingdom is theirs; hungry people are happy, because God will satisfy them; broken-hearted people are happy, because God will bring laughter to their hearts; people who are hated and misunderstood because of their faith are happy, because God will vindicate them. In the Luke version, there is also a flip side to the beatitudes, one that makes us a bit nervous. Those who are rich, those who are full, those who are happy, those who are popular, the winners in this life, might find themselves judged.

Then Jesus goes on to say, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. Turn the other cheek. Then, he sums it up by saying what we’ve always called the Golden Rule: “Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.”

It’s easier to come up with excuses and exceptions than it is to try and live up to those standards, isn’t it? Our culture would scorn us for not being aggressive enough; for being weak; for not standing up for ourselves. Gentleness, caring, forgiveness, that’s for losers, or so we’re taught.

Yet we look at the saints—and again, I’m using the term in the broadest sense for all who try to live lives that are faithful to Jesus Christ—we look at

the daily saints and we see something beautiful. We see people trying to do the good thing. We see people who might not know where their next paycheck is coming from, bringing in groceries for the food bank. We see nurses gently lifting the spirits of ill and distraught patients. We see teachers helping a troubled student find value and self-worth. We see members of a dysfunctional and divided family taking the first step to reconcile a broken relationship, maybe by apologizing, maybe by offering forgiveness. We see parents working second jobs and sacrificing their own well-being to help their children get a good start on life. We see people breaking down the walls that separate us; walls of nationality, of race, of gender and sexuality, of culture and class, by seeing that other person, that different person, as a child of God, and reaching out to him or her. We see quiet miracles happening. We see saints at work, transforming the world by one kind deed, by one act of love, by one embrace, by one healing touch, by one effort of understanding, of one word of forgiveness, by one gift of generosity at a time.

God through Jesus Christ invites us to a new pattern of life. If you looked at the bottom part of last week's bulletin, you saw this week's theme: Living, Loving, Dying, Rising. That describes Jesus Christ. It also describes Christ's saints. We live as children of God. We love, because that's the Great Commandment—to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's not just a commandment, it's a way of living as God lives, for God is love. We die in small ways as we sacrifice our own needs to help the needs of others, and at the end of this life's journey, we die literally and physically. Then we rise, to become part of the great communion of saints. As we sang earlier today,

O blest communion, company divine,
We live and struggle, they in glory shine.
Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!¹

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ William H. How, For All the Saints, verse 3. Chalice Hymnal, p.