

Gospel - Luke 19: 1-10

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost

All Saints Day



Sermon 11.3.19

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I am not a saint, but I played one on TV.

That's almost true. In high school, I won an award as the best actress in the state for my depiction of St. Joan of Arc from the play by George Bernard Shaw. I was told that it was filmed, so I could have been on TV. Somewhere. Thank goodness YouTube hadn't been invented yet. What I remember about this august occasion is that I had to return from the competition early for some other obligation and so I received my big award from one of my classmates on the front porch at my house.

That's probably as much pomp and circumstance as that moment deserved in the whole scheme of things. And that, friends, is pretty much the extent of my knowledge of Saints.

I refer to saints with a capital "s." Because I'm not much of an authority, I read up on sainthood in preparing my sermon. The process is complicated, though Pope John Paul II streamlined things considerably and venerated over 100 individuals and several groups just during his tenure. Many years before John Paul II, the process even included a Devil's Advocate, one whose job it was to refute the appeal for sainthood. I hope that individual had psychiatric counseling in his health care plan!

What's more, sources don't agree how many saints there are. Of course, it depends on the church, but even the Catholics can't agree – some sources claim 800 and change, many say there are upwards of 3,000, and some claim there are actually over 10,000. Part of this confusion is due to the fact that the Pope can venerate the individual, but then they're steeped for a few years while a miracle or two is cooked up on their behalf. St. Bede waited 1,164 years before he was finally canonized in 1889. Mother Teresa, on the other hand, was beatified in 2003 and canonized in 2016 by Pope Francis.

While I have nothing against individual saints, All Saints Day, according to Wikipedia, is a Christian festival in honor of all saints, known and unknown. According to an explanation I read in the Anglican pastor's blog, "It isn't a pagan conspiracy that All Saints Day is held near ancient pagan holidays. Instead, it is a victory. Ancient peoples were terrified of the spirits of the dead. They often tried to appease the spirits, including the spirits of their own ancestors. Christians brought about a powerful re-ordering and redemption of this fear, by supplanting these fears with the love and compassion of God in Christ."

Back to Joan of Arc. She was a soldier and while certainly she was young and brave and a martyr to the cause, it's a bit mystifying to me that a soldier gets sainted because she ostensibly heard voices convincing her that the 100 year war was a jihad that should be decided in favor of the French and that the English should be driven from their territory.. It's even more surprising that the Anglican Church recognizes Joan. You know, the Anglican Church? Church of England? Talk about forgiveness!

I do know one thing. Joan is in rarified air, as a Catholic saint who's female. According to anonymous blogger "Questions from a Ewe," based on a statistical sample, 84 percent of saints are male. The ideal profile for sainthood, she writes, is: Italian male Benedictine pope (or bishop) who dies on May 1st. She further notes: "If you insist on being female, which really craters your chances of sainthood, then for heaven's sakes do NOT have sex, or, if you do, be of royal birth." [If you don't mind poking fun at religion, this blog is hilarious:

<http://questionsfromaewe.blogspot.com/2014/04/saint-by-numbers.html>.]

This is not to say that I don't believe in Saints with a capital S. I think I do, because it seems right to venerate certain individuals in our church history who stand out. St. David, for example. What a beautiful story, that he lived simply and traveled widely to spread the Good News and start new churches. My point here is that on All Saints Day, we celebrate saints known and unknown. And so, we too, can be saints. With a small S, but nonetheless, saints.

What are the requirements?

Leslie Weatherhead in his book A Private House of Prayer, gave three definitions of a saint: one, a saint is someone in whom Christ lives again; two, a saint is someone who makes it easier to believe in God; three, a saint is someone who lets the light shine through.

I submit that the Gospel according to Luke provide a pretty good blueprint for sainthood. The book of Luke is full of these "conflict stories," starting in chapter 4 with Jesus offending religious authorities by speaking favorably of Gentiles. But in this passage, he boils it down, using the second person to ensure we know that Jesus includes you. And you. And you.

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, and those who speak up.

And in case you're unclear, he follows the beatitudes with a list of woes. Not this but this. These "reversals" are stark illustrations that the complicated laws of the past have been set aside for beliefs that even Gentiles can understand!

And then Luke tops it all off with the cliff notes, for those of us who are too busy to read the whole explanation: Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Do unto others as you would have them do to you.

Such beautiful, simple words, words we as Christians try daily and fail to honor. It's a good thing that God loves us, that God forgives us in real time. Because we can try again and again. Maybe we won't ever be like David, though I daresay he hungered every once in awhile for some mustard with his watercress.

We've all heard the hymn, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." The rhythm of the song always reminds me a little of a Dr. Seuss story, so you'll find me grinning during the procession into the world this morning, particularly as we sing about the fierce wild beast. But the second verse brings home my point:

"They lived not only in ages past there are hundreds of thousands still.

The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school or in lanes or at sea,

In church or in trains or in shops or at tea,

For the saints of God are just folk like me and I mean to be one, too."

Amen