

All Saints – C (19)

Luke 6:20-31

Ephesians 1:11-23

This last Friday, November 1, was actually All Saints Day, but we take time to observe it today. In that we are all called to be holy people, God's own chosen people, I think it is good for us to reflect on the saints who have gone before us, the saints around us and in our midst.

The formal observance of All Saints' Day began in the ninth century. However, in practice the observance of such a day was in vogue from a much earlier date. The original date was actually celebrated as Martyrs' Day. The emphasis of those earlier observances was the memory of the faithful departed who had triumphed over false gods and all the enemies who persecuted the faithful. That may cause you to wonder just what is a saint? Who are saints and how does one become a saint and what do saints look like or do? There are all kinds of popular definitions of a saint from do-gooders to an angelic person flying around heaven with a harp.

A part of the definition of a saint may be in what Scripture says Jesus expects of His followers. Today we heard some of those expectations in our gospel reading from Luke, also known as the Sermon on the Plain. It may sound familiar because Matthew also records a similar account of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount in his chapter 5. It may be good for us to revisit the Sermon on the Mount and contrast it with Luke's version.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain is perhaps a less familiar version of the beatitudes than the one found in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Luke has fewer blessings and woes; and he is not talking about spiritual needs, but rather material ones. And he has Jesus directing the message to the second-person (woe to YOU) rather than the third person.

You may remember that in Matthew's gospel, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in the song, Blest Are They, He talks about the poor in spirit and the meek who will inherit the kingdoms of heaven and earth. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God.

In Luke's interpretation of these words, Jesus sets high expectations for sainthood. The materially poor will be blessed, while the materially rich have received their consolation already. The physically hungry will be filled, while those who have plenty to eat will be hungry. Those who are in despair will laugh, while those who are laughing now will mourn and weep. Those who are

hated, excluded, and defamed because of their love for him will be rewarded greatly, while those who are respected and well-regarded will be treated as false prophets.

The saints are those who have loved and prayed for their enemies and given their material comforts to those who needed them more. In Matthew as in Luke, Jesus' expectations are so high that they certainly seem difficult if not impossible to meet. The Beatitudes and their demands, the requirements for a disciple, can almost cause even the most holy and committed among us to throw up their hands and exclaim with the disciples as we hear in Luke 18, "Then Lord, who can be saved?" "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle," Jesus says.

How then can we hope to fulfill the expectations of discipleship? How can anyone meet the demands of a follower of Jesus? Jesus replied, "What is impossible for people is possible with God." The answer is in our reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians today.

The believers at Ephesus have been "taken to the high places of blessing" and God has given them "everything they could possibly need." Yet, besides opening their heart-eyes to His "long range plan" as they "find out who they were and what they were living for," Paul also wants them to know "exactly what it is [God] calling is you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, ... the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him—endless energy, boundless strength!" (vv. 18-19).

Paul's primary goal, however, is neither to educate nor to simply inform. On the contrary, he seeks to transform the saints at Ephesus so that they may be encouraged to persevere and to remember God's gift of a power within them. Paul's words describing God's power are extreme as he heaps up adjective upon adjective. For example, it is not just "energy," but "endless energy." In addition, it is not just "strength," but "boundless strength."

Ephesians is one of the most optimistic books in the Bible. Verse 11 in chapter 1 declares that the inheritance of disciples is experienced once believers accept the fact of their destiny, their calling. In addition, the Ephesians are counseled to have confidence in this calling because it is based on God's divine power and might. So great is this inheritance, so overwhelming the divine power making it possible, that the response of the faithful is to do nothing less than "live for the praise" of Christ's glory.

"This strength" — which is at work within all believers, not just the Ephesians — is "endless" and "boundless." It is the same power by which "God raised [Christ] from death and set [Him] on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule." (vv. 20-21).

God has put Christ "is in charge of it all," and has given Him "the final word on everything," including "the church" which "is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence." (vv. 22-23).

That same energy and strength is at work in all believers. That means that the same power given to the Ephesians is given to believers now in this place. Have you considered how much power you have available to you? In Christ, the potential is almost unfathomable. It's yours to use. But it's also almost never tapped. And what power is that? It's the force Paul mentions in Ephesians 1:19 and 20 - - "the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him ... in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule."

In order to use this power, our hope must be in Christ and that glorious inheritance He promised us. Is that what you are hoping today? Most of the people I know trust in their feelings, in their intelligence, in some politician, or in some philosophical concept. Feelings change. Genius fades. Politicians tell people what they think people want to hear. Philosophies come and go faster than the latest best-seller.

But God raised Jesus from the dead and that fact won't change. If you believe in that truth and commit your life to Christ, that great power is yours, too.

How can we tell; how do we know the power is there and available to us? In a day and age when evil and sin seem to be so pervasive, how can we trust in the hope of power from God?

An early explorer in the Amazon valley felt swallowed up in endless forest, far from the ocean that could carry him home. However, one day he was surprised to notice a slight rise and fall of the water level in a small creek. Although he stood nearly 600 miles from the Atlantic, yet even here the pulse of the ocean was felt. So it is, Paul writes, with those in Christ. We are promised much that is yet distant, but for now we have been given the Holy Spirit. That Presence within us is evidence that what may seem yet far away is real, and that we indeed will reach it someday.

Does the church you serve have a sense of its own power and responsibility? How does it use that power to serve the community and world around it?

God's power is at work in us when we show our love for someone in little ways,

when the way we are with others gives the message that we care about their well-being.

God's power is at work in us when we help to carry another's load,

God's power is at work when we notice that we are all on a noble, though sometimes lonely, journey.

The “endless energy and boundless strength,” given to believers can make it possible for us to cure the sick, raise the dead, heal the broken-hearted, bring hope to those who are in despair, shine light to those who are in darkness, forgive wrongs and mend fences. That saint-power, given to believers, can enable us to help reconcile sinners to God and break down barriers among those here who are at odds.

The inheritance that Paul talks about is both what we receive and what we leave. It is a gift to us and a gift to others. It is a certainty for those who believe: sealed by the Holy Spirit though the welcome into God's family we receive at our baptisms, the nourishment we receive at The Lord's Table and the wisdom we hear in the words of Scripture.

Who then can be a saint; who is a saint? It is not just saints who do good. Anyone (even non-Christians) can be moral. So, what makes a saint? Saints are people who live by the Golden Rule. Saints are those who take seriously Jesus' expectations in Luke 27:30, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your good, do not ask for them again.”

Those are hard words and difficult to follow. How can we possibly live up to them? Who then can be a saint? Robert Louis Stevenson tells us who we saints are: “The saints are sinners who keep on going.”

The question of what a saint is recalls the old story of a little girl worshiping in church with her mother. She leaned over and asked her mother who all the people were in the stained-glass windows. The mother identified the apostles and other biblical personages who were represented in the stained glass as saints. Quizzed some time later as to what a saint is, the girl answered, “It's someone that the light shines through.”

To be a saint is our inheritance – a gift given to us, not because of what we do, but because of who we are: God's special and holy people who trust and believe that God works through us. The inheritance that we receive from God is not ours to keep, but ours to give. It is in the giving that we become saints; it is in persevering that we become holy and as we become holy, we take our place among the saints of the past and the saints of today.