

All Saints

Ephesians 1:11-23

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In much of the literature I've read recently on leadership, there's a bit of a controversy. The question is whether leaders are born or made. There are those who look at people's personality types and compare them with the measured personality types of some of the world's greatest leaders, and give a firm 'yea' or 'nay.' You're a leader or you're not. Others believe that anyone can be a leader: that while some people might have natural gifts or tendencies that might be helpful in leadership, anyone can cultivate the qualities of a leader. For these folks, leadership is something that you *do*, not someone you are. There are practices that make leaders; it's not in your DNA.

I think, to some extent, the same two sides exist for saints. Today we celebrate All Saints Day, a high holy day for the church, in which we typically name the honored dead of the past year – or perhaps those who have died long ago but have had significant influence on our lives as people of faith – and we light candles or lay flowers or say prayers of remembrance. And we will do that today, because it's important to remember where we came from: the naming of the saints is like pulling out the family album and going through the pictures to see how we got here, how we became who we are. But I'd like to suggest that All Saints Day isn't just about those who have died: it's also those who are here now and those who will follow us into the future.

Now when we first think of the word, "saints," the names and faces that pop to mind probably seem like extraordinary human beings, who had to have been *born* that way, with saintly DNA forming their saintly bodies and minds from their first days. We think of Mother Teresa, and her service to 'the least of these' on the streets of Calcutta. We think of St. Francis of Assisi, living in intentional poverty but spreading joy through the streets of Umbria with his cheerful songs. We think of St. Christopher, who supposedly helped the Christ child himself cross a dangerous river. Or, in the realm of the living, we think of folks like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, who helped a country drowning in hatred to take a breath of fresh air and begin to live again; Jimmy Carter, who has worked for decades to promote economic and social development and find peaceful resolutions to international conflicts; or Wangari Maathai of Kenya, who has helped plant 20 million trees in an age of land-grabbing and rapid deforestation.

When we think of saints, we think of these extraordinary people, who have done so much in their lives to change the world for the better, usually on a large and dramatic scale, and we think that we could never join their company. But the thing is, none of these saints is perfect. Mother Teresa was said to be a life-long smoker. St. Francis had to roll naked in the snow to defend himself against lustful thoughts. Nelson Mandela has had two failed marriages. We've probably all heard about Jimmy Carter committing adultery in his heart.¹ Saint Christopher happened upon work for God only as he was on his way to serve the devil – he was a saint by accident.

Now none of this is to say that they are less saintly, any of them – it's to say that they're human. They are saints, yes – extraordinary humans, but humans nonetheless. And their flaws might make the case that saints, like leaders, are made, not born. Their flaws suggest that saintliness is less someone you *are* and more something you *do*. Perhaps it's practices of holiness that are not beyond our reach.

¹ A reference to Carter's interview with *Playboy* in November 1976.

My favorite preacher and author, Barbara Brown Taylor, has said, “Generally speaking, the saints are not distinguished by their goodness. They are distinguished by their extravagant love of God, which shines brighter than anything else about them.”² They aren’t perfect – it’s just that their love of God eclipses everything else when we look at their lives.

And on All Saints Day, we claim that we’re related to all of them – living and dead. Perhaps we look a little different or live in a different place and time, but we have been washed by the same water and fed by the same bread and wine; the blood in their veins was Christ’s blood, as it is in ours; the light we see in them shines in us, too, because we belong to God. And that makes us brothers and sisters, all of us. All Saints Day isn’t just about remembering those who have passed: it’s about remembering what the book of Hebrews calls the ‘cloud of witnesses’ all around us, urging us on in our own walk toward holiness, calling us by name, shouting encouragement and holding up posters to push us forward on the race of discipleship throughout our lives.

Take a moment, now, to close your eyes – really, close your eyes – and imagine the generations of saints who have come before you – in your family, in this church, in the Pacific Northwest, in the body of Christ – generations of saints who have served faithfully, who have erred mightily, who have sung boldly and struggled desperately. Imagine generations flowing through the church – picture what they’re wearing, how they’re worshiping, even how they keep warm on a morning like this. And then, still with your eyes closed, let that stream of generations past flow into the future: imagine generations to come flowing even through *this* church: picture what they’re wearing, how they’re worshiping, how they serve faithfully and struggle desperately and love God and each other extravagantly.

We’re all connected, them and us, saints on both sides of that invisible veil that separates generations past and generations future. Age to age, we inherit the legacy of Christ, as Ephesians puts it, “the inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people.” It is passed down to us, so that we ourselves might be saints: in the words of the hymn, “there’s not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn’t be one, too.”³

We’re saints, all of us. We are all saints. Because we have inherited the extraordinary grace of redemption, and we pass on the inheritance – even today – as we teach our children to be faithful, to love God and each other with extravagance, as we strengthen ourselves with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, gathering around the banqueting table where all – in every generation – are welcome. That’s not to say that being a saint is easy – it’s certainly not. But as we support one another, and imagine that communion of saints cheering us on, we learn the practices of holiness, stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and look more and more like the extraordinary ordinary people we celebrate: full of extravagant love, heirs of a legacy, living lives of resurrection.

Amen.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “God’s Handkerchiefs,” *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999), 209.

³ “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” by Lesbia Scott, United Methodist Hymnal (1989) #712.