

WHAT MAKES A SAINT?

Revelation 7: 9-17; Luke 23: 32-43

Morris was around the church almost every day. He would check the doors, do small repairs and maintenance. He knew more about the boiler than anyone else, even the furnace people. But Morris was also a bit of a suspicious person. He was cranky too. When people came by the church, I always wanted to be there because if Morris opened the door, he'd be gruff and usually turn people away. Graciousness was not a character trait Morris possessed, nor did he trust people easily or their motivations. "They could use you and take advantage of you" he would say. They always came by for a handout knowing the church would give what it didn't have to give.

But people at the church knew Morris and his family for years. They were very much part of the community and everybody just laughed off Morris' crankiness and crustiness. Beneath all that, they would say, he has a heart of gold and loves the church. His wife was the sweetest, most faithful woman, involved in the woman's guild. Evidently, Morris had swept her off her feet when they first met, and she loved him dearly. She was the only one who could hug him and squeeze his cheeks in public. They had raised a family in the community and their children were all grown up now with successful careers.

One day I noticed Morris was out of breath. He made excuses for it, saying he was out having a long walk. After a few weeks many of us were talking about it. Morris was losing weight. He was looking pale. He was moving slower. He was even less cranky, which, given his personality, indicated something was wrong. Unfortunately, after some appointments and tests, Morris was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, inoperable and progressed. Many of us visited and soon enough, he was admitted to a palliative care unit to live out his remaining weeks of life.

The Morris I came to know in those few weeks, though, was a Morris I had never met before. He was apologetic for being a cranky and crusty old guy. But even more remarkable, he was incredibly gracious and kind with the people who came to see him. He was gentle with his children and grandchildren and welcomed their affection. But there was something more as well. Even though Morris never expressed his faith or talked about what he believed, he had a quiet certainty, assurance and confidence about his fate. He just knew he would be with God. He was at peace. He was ready to let go and grateful for the life he had been given. He had no regrets, other than maybe his crankiness and suspiciousness. But God had been good to him and his family and all was well. We held a service of celebration and thanksgiving for Morris at the church. We shared stories and laughed. Morris was no saint,

and yet, we also found comfort in believing that Morris had now entered his eternal rest with other saints in a communion beyond all time and space.

But would Morris qualify for entry into the category of sainthood? What makes a saint, after all? Well in certain traditions of Christianity – e.g. Orthodox and Catholic - individuals called saints are persons worthy of higher honour and veneration. They are recognized by canonization or glorification. Here are some of the qualifications used for such canonization - they must be:

- 1) An exemplary model; 2) An extraordinary teacher; 3) A wonder worker or source of benevolent power; 4) An intercessor (someone who can intercede with God on behalf of others) with miraculous results; 5) One who lives life often refusing material attachments or comforts;
- 5) One who possesses a unique and revelatory connection to the holy.

So, does Morris qualify? Do you? Do I?... Maybe in some ways and imperfectly at that. Are we all doomed then?... Let's try to answer these questions after we explore our scripture readings more deeply.

Our reading from Revelation paints a picture of a scene on the other side of this life – a scene in heaven. The book of Revelation is a genre of literature called apocalyptic. It addresses the big themes of life and death, heaven and hell and a last judgement. Is there any eternal justice beyond here and now? Is there any accountability beyond what people get away with here and now? Is there a larger consolation for victims of injustice and those who suffer in this life? These are the kinds of questions apocalyptic tries to answer.

But Revelation the book actually begins the first few chapters by also addressing specific churches in what was then called Asia minor (and present day Turkey). And the way these churches are described and the people that make up these churches, is anything but exemplary. For all the many ways they are distressed and oppressed for being Christians in a world where there is no freedom of religion for minorities, these Christians are also conflicted among each other. Under the stress and strain of persecution and maybe for other reasons as well, people are slackening in their faith, giving up their faith, fighting with each other and losing a sense of vision for who they are called to be as the hand, feet and heart of Christ.

And yet, by the time we get to chapter seven and our reading, we get this wondrous scene in heaven: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white...” The mood is celebratory. This multitude is singing a song of victory in the presence of God and Jesus, here called “the Lamb.” Nothing of this multitude’s flaws are mentioned. Nothing is declared about their failures as human beings in terms of their imperfections and lukewarm devotion. No. What is acknowledged is that they

have suffered and are now finding consolation and joy being together, worshipping and celebrating together. We're also told that "the one seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more... for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

What a glorious and comforting scene! What generous love to welcome such a multitude regardless of how well they achieved sanctity in their earthly lives. What matters is that they have suffered and are now being comforted. It doesn't matter where they have come from – their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and all those things we use to separate, distinguish and evaluate people's worthiness. Not to say that the book of Revelation doesn't have judgement in it. Yet the image of the Lamb who is slain and pours out his life for the sake of the sheep; the image of a vast multitude which includes many of the Christians of the churches of the first few chapters who have failed in their faithfulness... such imagery is also in this book. What a vision!

So what is revealed here about genuine sainthood? A saint is someone who has experienced the mercy and grace of God. To experience the mercy and grace of God means that such mercy and grace lives inside you. To experience the mercy and grace of God means that the way you look at the world, the way you engage others in the world, the way you care, the way you forgive and give people multiple chances, the way you work to build bridges rather than walls, the way you open yourself to understand someone else and where they come from... this is what makes a saint. And most of all, you know that you have failed and will fail to be worthy of the mercy and grace of God. But because it is the mercy and grace of God, you know that it is a gift given to you beyond anything you can ever achieve and anything you can ever earn or deserve. Your faith is in this infinite grace and mercy. You believe in it. You stake your life's meaning and purpose on it.

Have you experienced the mercy and grace of God? Maybe it's through people you have experienced it? Maybe it's through nature or music or art or some other circumstance or situation that simply came unexpected and as a surprise. But now you identify it as the mercy and grace of God. That's the deepest truth of your life. No matter all the bad stuff, difficult stuff or the struggles, the mercy and grace of God will be the period at the end of every sentence that is now your life.

And this is exactly the message we get in our gospel reading too. Jesus speaks words from the cross. This gives them revelatory significance. And he speaks them to two kinds of people. One group are at the foot of the cross – soldiers, religious leaders and others laughing at him, spitting on him and dismissing him as a failed messiah. Jesus prays: Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." They are so far from recognizing the mercy and grace of God extended to them they spit on it and live out of their hate,

resentment, bitterness and despair. But Jesus won't throw hate back at them. The hate bounces off him because something else lives in him – forgiving love. That's his power.

Then there is a criminal who is being crucified right next to Jesus. His whole life has been a mess and he is living his last moments. But in these moments he sees in Jesus the kind of mercy and grace he's never realized or known before. He cries out for it: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replies: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

So what do these words which bring the whole gospel account to its climax, reveal to us? Two things. First of all, the mercy and grace of God are for everyone, even for enemies. Is there a place for hell? All people in Jesus day believed in hell as much as heaven. But Jesus' revelation of the unconquerable grace and mercy of God tells us there is no final place for the concept of hell. Hell is rooted in hate. The concept of someone burning in hell for all time is a concept rooted in a desire for retribution. This is not the God Jesus reveals and embodies. So then, the grace and mercy of God are for everyone. Everyone is welcome into God's presence. The justice of God will find a way to address injustice and wrong and a way to embrace the victims without sinking into vengeance or retribution.

So then, everyone is welcome into God's presence. But not everyone is part of the unique communion of saints. This communion has a particular identity linked to being part of Christ. There is a Christian communion as there would be a communion for other faiths, as there would be for other families, cultures, races and more. For those of us who identify as Christian a core identity marker is being part of the communion of saints with Christ as our foundation. That means we are brothers and sisters here, as is Morris, as are all those who have been part of the communion here at Armour Heights church. They may not be with us in the flesh, but they are with us in spirit. The kingdom of heaven is all around us and we are never alone. What a powerful confession, if we can live inside it as those who believe it.

We are saints through the infinite grace and mercy of God embodied in Christ and we are surrounded by all those who have embraced such a faith. We may not always believe this. The questions and doubts may be really strong sometimes. Bad stuff may happen to make us feel hopeless and despairing. We may feel alone at times and not surrounded by grace, mercy and the communion of saints. But we gather here together to get grounded and inspired in our spiritual imagination. No matter all the bad stuff, difficult stuff or the struggles, the mercy and grace of God will be the period at the end of every sentence that is now our lives.

May you all, everyone here, feel included in the communion of saints rooted in the infinite mercy and grace of God. May we feel inspired to go out and create new ripples of mercy and grace in an ocean full of hate, prejudice and negative energy. May we learn ways to fight for justice without corrupting our hearts with retribution. And may we learn how to incorporate a spiritual imagination that believes those we have loved who are no longer with us are in the flesh, surround us in spirit; Amen.