

Sermon ✝ November 6, 2022

Luke 6:20-31

Frank H. Maxwell

Today is All Saints' Sunday. Of course, All Saints' Day, itself, is always observed on November 1<sup>st</sup>. Not all Christians denominations observe this day. And even amongst those churches that honor this day, there is some confusion regarding what makes one a saint.

Perhaps All Saints' Day is somewhat unsettling because we blanch at the word *saint*. When we hear it, we think of some holy person . . . some person whose shoes we could never fill . . . a person so different from us and so removed from where we live our lives. And sometimes the word *saint* is used within a promotion process, like being elevated to brigadier general in the Lord's army. (Unfortunately, this *promotion* usually occurs after death).

Of course we continue to use the word *saint* in everyday conversation. When speaking of an especially beloved person, we say, "*That person is a saint.*" On the other hand, we may be skeptical of the word because it was used to describe someone, say one of our relatives, whom we just happened to know all too well. And about whom we seldom used the word *saint*.

Pastor Richard Jeske had such a relative:

*"Your uncle Elmer was a saint," people would often say to me, but I knew that Uncle Elmer bossed his wife around, kicked the dog, demolished his business competitors, drank too much and smoked the biggest black cigars I ever saw. But he taught a mean Sunday School class, was president of the congregation, and was the highest financial contributor to the church which made him, in other people's eyes, an absolute saint.*

*I had another uncle who was more like a real saint, I guess; he didn't smoke, drank nothing stronger than milk, lived to the age of ninety-six, and was a pastor in the Lutheran church. Maybe he would qualify for being a saint, but one thing I knew for sure, I'd much rather hang around with Uncle Elmer!"*

What about sainthood and those saints who have been a part of our lives? Let's briefly consider all of this.

What does the Bible say? If we *really* read our Bibles, we find that many of the heroes of the faith are anything but *saintly*, holy people, removed from the grime of life. Abraham, once passed off his wife, Sarah, as his sister to avoid getting his throat slit by the king who fancied her. Moses, the lawgiver, started out his career by murdering an Egyptian. David arranged the death of an army officer so that he could marry the grieving widow.

And the list continues in the New Testament; Paul the persecutor, Mary the prodder, Peter the denier. They may look holy in those stained glass windows, but close up, they are as soiled as the rest of us. And, you may not want them as your ancestors, but there they are in the biblical pages as your saints.

We look back to them on this day, but something we tend to forget is that they looked forward to us too. In fact, none of them is a saint in isolation from us, nor we from them.

Nowhere in the Bible is any one person by him or herself ever called a *saint*. Throughout the Scriptures the word saint is always used in the plural. In the Old Testament, it refers to the people of Gods as a whole . . . set apart for God's purposes

No Christian believer is self-made . . . and so we celebrate the believers of the past who have made us who we are.

We believe *only* because someone—Abraham, Sarah, David, Ruth, Peter, our parents, spouse or perhaps our Uncle Art—lived the faith before us and told us the story in such a way that we became part of it.

And they told their stories with us in mind, and they placed into their stories their own vulnerabilities because they knew that we were vulnerable too. In their stories, they shared their humanity with us.

But, somewhere along the way, we have glamorized them and allowed our memories to be very selective. And in that process we have placed saints on a pedestal upon which they were never supposed to stand.

It sounds like Pastor Jeske's Uncle Elmer did some great things for his church, but it also sounds like he was kind of a jerk. We have to be very careful about our expectations of others . . . especially those saints around us.

My friend and former bishop, Jon Enslin, shared this story with me many years ago:

A pastor in our synod had conducted a funeral for the daughter of an inactive member. When the pastor asked the man why he had stayed away from church for almost twenty years, the man replied,

*"I was on a work crew which was helping to build a new garage for the church parsonage many years ago, I worked from nine in the morning until one-thirty in the afternoon . . . and the pastor's wife never offered us lunch . . . so I quit going to church."*

The astonished pastor replied, *"Do you mean to tell me that you stayed away from church and denied yourself the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Christian fellowship, and Holy Communion for over twenty years because a pastor's wife didn't offer you lunch?!?"*

We may smile at such story, but unfortunately I can share dozens of similar stories from my own ministry.

The fact of the matter is, we are all *saints-in-process*. We are the ones who are writing the next chapters for those who will come after us.

And we've got to be careful about our righteous judgement of our fellow saints as well as the kinds of unfair and unobtainable expectations we place on one another.

No believer is self-made, and this day celebrates all the believers who have made us the saints we are. And that doesn't mean only those from the distant past.

Think this day of those persons who brought you to the waters of baptism, who vowed to place the Holy Scriptures in your hands. Think of parents, grandparents, Sunday School teachers, friends—who told you the ancient stories even before you could read. Think of those who nurtured you in your faith and helped to shape the story of your own life. Think of them (today) on All Saints' Sunday and thank God for them.

And remember that the word *saints* is best used in a plural sense. And that, my friends, is extremely good news for it means that we, as individuals or as a congregation, are never alone.

We are now and for all times—one—with the communion (the fellowship) of saints. Amen!