

All Saints Day, 2017

Becoming Saints

To God's beloved, called to be saints...Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them...Do not repay evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...Overcome evil with good. ¹ Amen.

In the first eleven chapters in his letter to the Romans Paul explains that it is by faith that we are brought into right relationship with God, it is by faith that we know we are *always* held in the loving arms of God, no matter what, despite our sinning, our falling short, our doubt, even death. Paul explains how great God's love for us is and in chapter twelve, what we hear today, Paul writes these beautiful words as a description of how our lives ought to look as followers of Christ. How ought we live as Christians?

Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Do not repay evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. Overcome evil with good. These are the marks of a Christian.

This counsel comes from a saint our church is built upon. Paul wrote in times of persecution, he wrote at a time when it seemed the end times were around the corner. The church calendar is set for us years ahead and we can fall back on it. Today we honor All Saints Day and including this founding apostle to whom we can thank for many beautiful and complicated passages that have helped shape this holy community we are part of today. Paul's words have drastically changed the lives of many: love is patient, love is kind; rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice. Paul has given us words

¹ Romans 1:16, 12:9,14,17,21

of hope, endurance in times of suffering, and promise in the love of Christ. His words have changed the lives of many: Martin Luther, Augustine, Karl Barth, and maybe Paul has broken open the faith of people you know in some way, too.

On All Saints Day we don't simply recognize the spiritual "elite." Today is an important feast in the church year when we recognize and celebrate the entire Communion of Saints. That includes those who the church has set apart as examples, St. Francis, St. Mary, St. Teresa and all who have gone before us--those we remembered on All Souls day last Sunday--it includes those who are yet to come and those who live today, who walk among us as God's holy children. All the Saints are present here with us every day. Today we give thanks for all the examples of holiness we have known, met or heard about and with Paul's words, we also today, recognize our own potential, our own calls to be saints, a word Paul used to describe the earliest Christians which includes all those who find Christ to be Lord.

Saint literally means holy. Holy, is not an adjective we often use to describe ourselves. Tonight, let us consider how it is we are holy. As children made in God's image we all are, in some way holy. We are the saints, the Body of Christ in the world. We are the ones who *share* God's gentleness, justice, love, and forgiveness with the world. It is part of who we are as Christians. And, how we act, as Christians, is important.

Our Christian life is not something stagnant or stationary. We are *always* growing and responding to the needs of the day, the age, we are always growing in our love of Christ and how we share that love with one another. Being a person of faith is a lifelong process that calls for all of who we are—our creativity, our imagination, our compassion, our passion, our humor, our heart, our

reason...everything. I think the saints we usually think of first are those who have learned and shown that in giving all of who we are to God there is not loss but freedom and joy.

This kind of giving of all of ourselves to God—is not reserved for someone else, it is a holiness each one of us can participate in, no matter the kind of life we have lived. Paul persecuted Christians and then after his conversion founds and consults with many communities that follow Christ and goes on to teach them to bless those who persecute you, forgive, love even when you should hate. He didn't have the best start as holiness goes, persecuting others. Nonetheless we remember him for his remarkable faith and his priceless contribution to what the church is today.

We embody our faith, we give ourselves to Christ, as Saints--God's holy people--even as unholy as we may feel against a list like Paul's. And how we live as followers of Christ like a muscle that we must build, when we make more space for God in our lives, it shows in how we act. No matter where we are in our life of faith, we keep stretching and strengthening, trying even if we don't know how until we have the movements and moments when we too serve as a saint, a holy example, for others.

There is a story from the Desert fathers, 1st and 2nd century monks and nuns who retreated from the corruption of the city into the desert to pursue God: A monk came to Abba Sisoë and said, "What shall I do, Father, for I have fallen from grace?" And Abba Sisoë replied, "Get up again." The monk came back shortly after and said: "What shall I do now, for I have fallen again? And the old man said to him, "Just get up again. Never cease getting back up again!"

We fall and we get back up, we fall and we get back up, when it comes to following living a holy life. It may not be our first instinct to return evil with good, to bless those who persecute us, but we are called to forgiveness and with God's help we are able to share this with others.

Each day, we are offered endless opportunities to act as God's holy people. Sometimes big and sometimes small, we are offered a moment to hesitate for and respond in a way that reflects our belief in an all-loving God. And, the small actions add up: to *forgive* someone, anyone, who has done us wrong or even to forgive ourselves, to *bless* someone who cuts us off in traffic, to *bless* the one who acts unkindly, to *love* first rather than judge, to extend hospitality to someone who is different or who we may usually ignore. We keep trying, we try until our Saintry actions become part of who we are and when we fall, no matter how big the fall feels, we get up again, and never cease getting up. The Christian life is not a story of the times we fall, it is about the times we get back up, it is about the times that we are saints to one another, that is what matters, that God delights in.

Our holiness, our Christian action shows others markers of the Christian life. "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them, do not repay evil with evil but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all, overcome evil with good." These are not meant to remain as words on a page but actions in our lives. We give thanks today for all the saints who have shown us this radical way to live, much beloved or perhaps known only to you and a few others, who have showed us how to live like Christ. For us, may we never cease getting back up, that we may continue and grow to be God's holy people, loving with all of ourselves, and recognizing that we are the saints another may need.