

Sermon ~ November 1, 2020

All Saints Day

Who Are Your Saints?

Old Testament Scripture

Psalm 137:1-6

Beside the rivers of Babylon we thought about Jerusalem, and we sat down and cried.
We hung our small harps on the willow trees.

Our enemies had brought us here as their prisoners,
and now they wanted us to sing and entertain them.

They insulted us and shouted, “Sing about Zion!”

Here in a foreign land, how can we sing about the Lord?

Scripture introduction:

In Eastern Orthodox churches there is a frontal screen. On this screen is painted an icon of Jesus, his mother Mary, John the Baptist, and whoever the patron saint of the particular church is. This is found in every Eastern Orthodox Church.



In the old churches, such as the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Assumption in Cathedral Square in the Kremlin in Moscow, every surface is covered with icons. Though some are over 500 years old the vivid colors are still there. We stood transfixed and the Hebrew scripture we will hear shortly came to mind ~ *surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.*



Most Orthodox churches today do not have so many icons painted on their walls ~ however Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church in Butte, Montana is the exception. I introduce the Hebrew scripture with these pictures to give you a vision of what some have understood this scripture to mean.

Hebrews 12:1

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us.
So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us.

John 15:12

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

More than 20 years ago now the talk in the Roman Catholic Church was about the process of Mother Teresa becoming a saint ~ that is one formally recognized and canonized by the Roman Catholic Church.

I remember saying when she died that the Catholic Church would make her a saint as soon as possible ~ that is ~ time requirements would be waved if at all possible.

She died in 1997. In 1999 Pope John Paul II did wave the traditional five year waiting period after a person died to begin the canonization process toward sainthood.

On October 20, 2003, Mother Theresa was beatified, making sainthood now only one step away. On September 4, 2016 she became a saint.

Now, what I've just described to you is far more than what I used to know about the saints in the Catholic Church. The truth of the matter is, I grew up with the idea that saints were a "Catholic" thing ~ and I was protestant ~ so I just ignored the whole thing!!

Little did I know that All Saints Day was one of the very oldest of Christian holy days. In the 300's it was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost ~ that is 8 weeks after Easter. Once when I was visiting with a group in a Greek Orthodox Church I discovered that the Orthodox churches ~ that is Greek, Russian, Serbian, etc. ~ still celebrate All Saints Day on the first Sunday after Pentecost.

In 610, Pope Boniface moved the day officially to May 13. Later, in the 700's, Pope Gregory III would move the date for celebrating All Saints Day to November 1, and thus it became associated with All Hallows Eve, or Halloween.

As an aside, Martin Luther tacked up his 95 complaints against the Catholic Church on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, on Halloween night ~ not because it was Halloween ~ ~ but because he knew everyone would be in church the next day ~ All Saints Day ~ and would see what he had written. That is how extremely important the holy day ~ All Saints Day ~ was. You simply did not miss attending church on that day!!

Now, as I said, I always thought saints had something to do with special people who had died and were Catholic. It never occurred to me it was Biblical. Hear what Paul says to the people of Corinth in I Corinthians 1:1-3.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Saints ~ people of God. In the Bible concordance on my computer there are 66 references to saints in the Bible ~ 65 of them are in the New Testament!

And these references are not about people who have died ~ but rather about people living in the faith. ***Obviously, I needed to rethink my understanding of saints!!***

The root word for saint is “sanctus” and it means holy. The dictionary defines a saint as a person who is admired because of their virtue. I would say, a saint is a person who lives out what Jesus said in the gospel of John that we heard read: *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”*

Think about it. A person who is admired because of their virtue ~ or a person who loves as Jesus loved.

And another way to look at saint. I was once at a retreat on spirituality and one of the definitions that was given for spiritual discipline was *“The process of falling in love with God and trying to become more like God.”*

Over the years I’ve found myself reflecting ~ that’s how we could define saints. Saints are people ~ living and those who have died ~ known by us personally or known only at a distance.....people who have made a difference in our lives ~ in significant ways or sometimes seemingly minor waysbut people who have lived their lives always trying to be more God-like, and the in the process, touching our lives.

More than likely most of the people we would consider saints in our own lives would say to us ~ oh no ~ I’m not a saint ~ but they are. They are people who have made a difference in our lives. And they are people who are, or have been, in the *process of falling in love with God and trying to become more like God* in their daily lives.

When I said I wondered how long it would be until Mother Teresa was a saint, it was a recognition that for millions in the world she was already a saint when she was alive. She lived her life as one who sought to be more like God, and as a result, she loved.

Now please note: In no way was Mother Teresa perfect, as are any of us. She herself wrote how much she doubted about God ~ and even when she was alive there was a lot of questions surrounding her mission in India.

So, think for a moment ~ who are the saints in your life? Who are the people who have made a difference in your life by their loving ~ by their seeking to live a life that is more God-like.

For many the late Supreme Court Justice, Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a saint. Certainly not everyone agreed with her ~ but for many she stood up for them when they felt marginalized and without a voice. And she was Jewish.

In Jewish tradition when a person dies people say "may her memory be for blessing." The blessing does not mean "may we remember her fondly" or "may her memory be a blessing to us" ~ rather the blessing implied is this: May you be like Ruth. May her memory be for blessing. May her memory be for revolution. May we become a credit to her name.

It was also interesting to note that Ruth Bader Ginsburg died on Rosh Hashanah ~ the beginning of the Jewish new year ~ and in Jewish tradition it is said that a person who dies on Rosh Hashanah is a Tzedek, a good and righteous person.

In the Jewish understanding correcting injustice, balancing the scales, evaluating the distribution of power and creating equity is tzedakah ~ or the work of righteousness.

So for instance a simple example could be ~ one should donate to the local food bank not to gain favor with God, or to be nice to those with less than ourselves, but because it is unjust for anyone to be without food, especially while others have plenty.

Saints.....

As we think about saints it is important to note as well, that your name will be on someone else's list of saints. Each of us is important in the lives of others. And each of us are in the process of learning how to *more fully fall in love with God*. We are all saints!!

In our hymnal there is a song entitled "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," written in 1929 by Lesbia Scott. Verse three of this song really does sum up who saints are:

They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still. The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will. You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store, in the church, by the sea, in the house next door; they are saints of God, whether rich or poor, and I mean to be one too.

We are all saints ~ and when Paul sent his greeting to the saints ~ that included us.

Over the years I have taken groups to visit Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church in Butte, Montana. The ceiling and all the walls in the sanctuary are covered with frescoed icons ~ making it truly an incredible place to visit.

Once a gentleman, who was giving us a tour, was talking about the icons. Icons are paintings of people and in an Orthodox church they are always found on the frontal screen, and as much as possible, on the walls, and on the ceiling, though few today are like the church in Butte.

This gentleman said to us “when people come to worship, we are surrounded by the pictures of the saints ~ this helps us prepare for worship.

As I thought about that for this All Saints Day on the strangest of years that probably any of us can remember I found myself thinking ~ but I am not in a church building surrounded by each other ~ surrounded by saints. The reading from Hebrews ~ *therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses* ~ felt a little different.

In fact I found myself reflecting on the words of the psalmist today saying ~ *By the rivers of Babylon - there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*

The Israelites had been captured and hauled off to a foreign place. They believed God was in the temple. The temple was destroyed. Who knew where God was now ~ and you want me to sing one of my songs to God?!

Here we are eight months into a pandemic ~ eight months since we have worshiped together. How can we worship when we can’t be together? How can we be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses?

Tradition says it was in Babylon that the Jewish captives in a foreign land got creative. They realized that God had not left them ~ and they began to assemble in small groups that would eventually become the basis for the synagogue.

We find ourselves in our homes watching or listening to worship via the internet. We find ourselves seeing each other’s faces by zoom ~ and thankful we have the technology to be able to do that in the midst of a pandemic!

And we realize that we continue to be surrounded by a *great cloud of witnesses* ~ the saints in our lives. For no matter where may find ourselves ~ those people who have made a difference in our lives ~ be they living or have passed on ~ have become a part of who we are.

I invite you today ~ this All Saints Day ~ or sometime during the coming week ~ to take some intentional time to remember and give thanks for the saints in your life. Maybe even make a list to visually see their names and remember.

And for each of us ~ may we each find ourselves in the continual *process of falling in love with God.....and becoming more God-like* as we follow Jesus command to “*Love one another as I have loved you.*”

And may we truly be a credit to each of the saints in our lives!

I close with a song written by John Bell, a pastor and song-writer out of the Iona Spiritual Community in Scotland. Let us reflect on the saints in our lives.

*For all the saints who've shone your love
In how they live and where they move,
For mindful women, caring men,
Accept our gratitude again.*

*For all the saints who loved your name,
Whose faith increased the Savior's fame,
Who sang your songs and shared your word,
Accept our gratitude, good Lord.*

*For all the saints who named your will,
And showed the kingdom coming still
Through selfless protest, prayer, and praise,
Accept the gratitude we raise.*

*Bless all whose will or name or love
Reflects the grace of heaven above.
Though un-acclaimed by earthly powers,
Your live through theirs has hallowed ours.*

Amen