

“The Company of Heaven”
Matthew 5:1-11, Revelation 7:9-12
First Presbyterian Church
November 5, 2017
All Saints Sunday
Gratitude Sunday

Matthew 5

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

Well, this has been a busy week for our sisters and brothers in “higher church” traditions: Wednesday was All Saints’ Day... and then Thursday was the feast of All Souls. On All Saints’ Day the church remembers the saints whose stories we know something about – the saints who left a name: folks like Saint Peter, Saint Paul, or Saint Mary. Then, on All **Souls’** Day the church remembers ALL of the faithful departed... ALL who “having lived this life in faith, now live eternally” with God – folks like our relatives and friends and the dear woman across the street... saints who were NOT famous... saints known to God alone. And it is thought that during this busy week - that commemorating All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days... once each year the church

would come into communion with all our “kin” (so to speak)... with everyone to whom we are related by Christ’s blood. This is the great “company of heaven” with whom we pray while celebrating the Lord’s Supper... this is the “communion of saints” of which we read and speak and sing.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Taylor, tells about an All Hallows’ Eve service at her church. On Halloween night they all gathered in the parish hall to prepare themselves for the celebration of All Saints and All Souls. Folks were dressed as their favorite saints. John the Baptist was there (carrying his head on a silver platter overflowing with fruit). Saint Francis was there with little stuffed birds sewn all over his garment. Saint Cecilia was there... as was Saint Nicholas... there was even a woman with a great silver arch over her head labeled “Gateway to the West” – she was Saint Louis.

Of course, there were also folks who either didn’t read the newsletter or just did their own thing. A couple of cowboys showed up... a mother and son both dressed as pirates... Garfield the cat... and not one, but two Crayola crayons - one red and one blue. There was plenty of fun and games... and a loud parade which passed by a panel of costume judges. And after it all, each person was given a glittery halo to wear as they marched over to the dimly lit sanctuary for the service. Taylor says it was quite a sight – all those different people wearing halos that were bobbing and swaying and sparkling in the light of the candles. It was almost like a time exposure capturing saints and souls from all the centuries somehow gathered together in one place. And what bound them all together... what they all had in common was their halos.¹

Throughout Christian history artists have used halos to indicate sacred or holy figures... martyrs and significant heroes of the faith. So, how exactly do WE come by these halos? How does anyone qualify to wear a halo? Well, there are a number of ways - according to Roman Catholic tradition, two things are necessary for sainthood: there needs to be proof of a good and pious life on earth... which is then confirmed by evidence of at least three miracles after death. By this definition, “sainthood” is clearly out of reach for most of us. Another option is the Ten Commandments (not to be confused with the “Ten Suggestions”) which spell out the essentials of a godly life. Again, most of us will fall far short. And then, there are the beatitudes... these words of Jesus I read a moment ago. It is tradition and therefore, no mistake that the beatitudes are read every year on All Saints Day: blessed are the poor in spirit... those who mourn... those who are meek... the peacemakers who are persecuted for righteousness sake. Have you ever found a more eloquent list of saintly virtues... or a list of more impossible ones? Like the Ten Commandments, we tend to see the Beatitudes as casting an ideal vision of who we can be... a moral checklist of sorts... which when accomplished leads to God’s approval and blessing. And yet, if that’s what’s required to be a saint... if that’s the job description, then we won’t even apply... because we know we don’t qualify.

¹ This introduction and story is told in a sermon entitled “The Company of Heaven”, found in *Mixed Blessings*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, p.80-83.

Well, if you don't hear anything else this morning please hear this: if we have to perfectly OBEY the Ten Commandments and DO the Beatitudes to be saints, then there wouldn't be any saints... absolutely none! Yet, for some reason the New Testament is filled with references to the saints... sixty in the New Testament and forty just in the letters of Paul. And if you read these, you quickly see the kind of people he's talking about – well, they're definitely not "saints" in the "holier-than-thou" sense. Take the Corinthians for example – there were divisions and factions among them – folks pledged loyalty to this leader and that - and they fought passionately over which leader was the best. Yet Paul calls them "saints". There was sexual immorality and even incest in the church. The wealthier members came to worship earlier than the working people – over-indulged in the wine and ate up all the food... making table fellowship impossible. Yet, Paul calls them "saints". They fought over who among them had received the most important spiritual gift... they clearly hadn't figured out how to live together so Paul had to preach to them a beautiful and pointed sermon on love. Yet, Paul still calls them "saints". They were flawed and imperfect and contentious and arrogant and selfish... yet, somehow God uses them... and uses them effectively... to be God's gracious presence in the world. This is why Paul speaks of the Corinthians (and of all Christians) as "earthen vessels" - "We have this treasure in clay jars," he writes, "so that it may be made clear that his extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."² The truth is that for Paul, the word 'saint' and "church member" are almost synonymous. Everyone who has decided to follow Jesus is a saint, according to Paul, because it's not about being good, it's about being God's. So that a good definition of the word "saint" might be this: A saint is a window through which another world is glimpsed... a person through whom the light of God shines. And if there is one thing Scripture is clear about, it is you can be less than perfect and still be a window through which the light of God shines.

One of the assignments my senior year in seminary was to write an account of my faith journey. I had written statements of faith and belief as class assignments, but in part to prepare me for the process of searching for a call, I was asked to reach far back in my memory and recall the names and faces of people who had influenced me and touched my life. Family members and friends... Sunday school teachers and pastors... coaches and scoutmasters – people who loved me and invested themselves in me... folks who taught me Bible verses and stories... people who guided me and accepted me even when I was hard to accept. We, back then – especially when I was very young – they all seemed saintly and perfect... they were to me people who could do no wrong. But now I know they were all very human and that some of them had significant weaknesses and faults... Now I know they were all earthen vessels – fragile and imperfect - yet they were windows through which God's light shone on me and into my heart.

This week I read description of the church... I think it comes from Amos Wilder. Wilder speaks not of the "ideal church" of Jesus Christ, but the "real church" of Christ... which is the church we celebrate today... the communion of faithful, but imperfect saints... a community of earthen vessels.

² 2 Corinthians 4:7

If we are to find any grace it is to be found in the world... I need a “worldly” form of spirituality... one that includes a group of actual flesh-and-blood human beings that will nourish me... I need a gospel that makes sense not of some special religious realm but of the actual day-to-day world I live in. And I need guides... to whom I can apprentice myself. In my case the group is a struggling little church in my neighborhood, a place where I must contend with younger and older people some of whose views I appreciate and others whose ideas I find intolerable. The music is often stirring, sometimes off key. The preaching is uneven. There is never enough money... How often I have been tempted to jettison this all-too-human little freckle on the Body of Christ and stay home on Sunday... but I do not. A voice within me keeps reminding me that I need these fallible human beings, whose petty complaints never quite overshadow the love and concern underneath. This precarious little church may not be the ideal Christian community... still it exists. It is where the Word becomes flesh.³

The same can certainly be said of this Christian community... it may not be ideal... and surely it isn't... but it still exists... and it is where the Word becomes flesh. And that's what we're up to today... we are remembering the saints who have gone before us; those who are listed in this morning's bulletin and many, many others... not because they were perfect or even good, but because they were God's windows through which another world was glimpsed... they were persons through whom the light of God shined.

And then, as strange as it sounds, we are recognizing **our** own sainthood... taking our place in the company of heaven... as on this day we are all gathered together in one place... around one table... partaking of the one bread... old saints and new... well-known and un-known except to God... the quick and the dead... all of us saints... all of us with halos... yes, all of us with halos whether we can see them or not.⁴ Amen.

³ Amos Wilder as quoted in Harvey Cox, *Turning East*, p.173-174.

⁴ Taylor again, p, 77

