

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

November 4, 2018

All Saints Sunday

I John 3:1-3
Romans 3:21-24

Everyday Saints

Saints have had a long, important, and ever-changing role in the history of the church.

In the first three hundred years after Christ died, a saint was someone who was killed for believing in Jesus. We also call these people martyrs.

Then in the year 313, Constantine became emperor of the Roman empire, and after his conversion to Christianity, he made it the law that everybody had to be a Christian. And for the next 1,300 years or so the Church developed their process for canonizing saints.

Churches were built in honor of a saint. And praying to the saints who would intercede to God for you became an important part of medieval Roman Catholic religion.

Then came the Reformation. Martin Luther and other reformers did not like the idea of praying to and through the saints. They believed that you don't need someone else to pray for you - you can pray to God directly yourself. So during the Reformation, the meaning of saints changed. During this time, a *saint* began to refer to Christian loved ones who had died and gone to be with God before us.

Then about a hundred years ago, All Saints celebrations in local churches began lifting up the names of people who had died the past year from their congregations. (As we will here during Communion.)

And then there are the secular definitions of saints. Such as a saint being a person who lives and puts up with a really unbearable person. Or a saint is someone who is near perfect.

And while each of these understandings is interesting, none of them are biblical!
The Bible has a different take on saints.

The word, saint, is never single. It is always plural. So the Bible does not use, nor does the Bible have a concept of Saint John, Saint Mark, Saint Luke. The word, in fact is never found in the singular; it is always plural like in the hymn, *For All the Saints*.

In the letters of Paul, he begins several of them by identifying the people he is writing to:
Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ. (Ephesians)

And the church in Rome:
Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle... to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints.

And the church in Corinth:
Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.

The word, saints, means, God's holy ones. We are God's holy people. And, we are called holy, not because we ourselves are holy; but because God is holy, and because we belong to God, we are called holy.

Our definitions of saints from the past two thousand years: saints as martyrs, saints as canonized people who give us access to God, saints as those who have died as Christians, saints as people who have died this past year in the church...none of these definitions of saints is biblical.

In the Bible, we also discover that saints are always living people - living people who belong to God.

The story goes about a children's sermon which took place in a church which had beautiful stained glass windows of the saints. The pastor was pointing out who each one was and all the things they were known for. Then he asked the kids, "So, what is a saint?"

And one little girl gave the answer, "A saint is someone the light shines through." Yes, exactly! A saint is a person through whom the light of God shines.

In 2007 the Roman Catholic priest who was at the time overseeing the process to make Mother Theresa a Saint, wrote a book, *Come Be My Light*. It is a wonderful biography of her life and ministry held together by her personal letters to her closest superiors. In it we learn that she lived through long periods of time where she felt abandoned by God even as she continued her work in the slums of Calcutta

What makes her "saint-like" is her faithfulness as much as her faith. Saints who have become canonized, as well as saints we know in our time are so because of their ability to keep on keeping on.

Even when it seems to them like they are walking through an endless desert, they plod on, knowing that obedience is more important than emotional satisfaction; having a right spirit is more important than being happy.

Surely, Mother Theresa would have preferred to walk a less desolate path through life, to have enjoyed more inner joy as well as outer virtue. But as Martin Luther confessed many times, he found more help in the imperfections and limitations of the saints than in knowing of their heroic achievements.

An all too human Mother Teresa is an impressive witness to God's grace which brought her through spiritual trials that she had not anticipated. She did not abandon the God who seemed to have abandoned her, as she very well might have done.

There's a difference between doubting and giving in to doubt. Because Mother Teresa did not give in to her doubts, she became a witness to a faith that did not fail, and a hidden God who did not let her go.

The feast of All Saints does not honor a company of "immortals," far removed from the realm of ordinary human life. The saints are not "superhero" humans, but those who realize God's call on their lives in very explicit and clear ways.

So for protestants this is an important day, because we remind ourselves that the true company of saints is (at least for us) even greater than the list of those who have been formally canonized and who have gone before us in the faith.

Not everyone is called to be a St. Theresa. But there is a path to holiness that lies within our individual circumstances, that engages our own talents and temperaments, that involves our own strengths and weaknesses, that responds to the needs of our own neighbors and our particular moment in history. (Karl Rahner, "All Saints," in *Theological Investigations* 8, 1977)

Remember - in the Bible, and in our faith, saints are normal people, normal people who differ from most others in this world, not because of the degree of their moral perfection, but because of the degree of their faith and how, because of their faith and how they live it; they draw others to give praise to God and inspire them to want to believe in and follow the Christ whom they believe in and follow.

David Livingston was a famous British missionary in Africa during the 1800's. Toward the end of his life, he disappeared in the heart of Africa for six years. Henry Stanley, a journalist from NY went searching for

him. After a long search, Henry finally found Dr. Livingston and gave us that famous line from history.
“Dr. Livingston, I presume?”

Henry stayed with Livingston for four months before returning home and sometime after that Henry Stanley wrote his memoirs in which he said: “Dr. Livingston made me a Christian and he didn’t even know he was doing it. He inspired me and didn’t even try to.”

We are called to be saints...

People who are set apart because of our faith.

People whose lives are dedicated to the worship of God and the doing of God's will.

People who inspire in others the desire to know and follow Christ Jesus.

Saints - then and now - are not perfect - but they are faithful... and chances are within arm’s reach of where you’re sitting.

May it be so. Amen.