

Little Saints

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
the Reverend Agnes W. Norfleet

November 3, 2019
All Saints Sunday

Psalm 146

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! ²I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. ³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. ⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. ⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. ¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

I love the way All Saints invites us to pause and reflect on the cycles of life and death and the new life we have come to trust through the promise of the resurrection. I also find the history of how the church came to designate All Saints Day kind of fascinating.

The recognition of particular saints began in the early centuries of Christianity when so many were martyred for the faith. The anniversaries of their death came to be celebrated as their birthdays in the Lord. For each of them, a day of remembrance was set apart during the year to honor the early saints. People like Stephen the first Christian martyr, St. Francis of Assisi who gave up great wealth to serve the Lord in poverty, St. Veronica who is said to have wiped the face of Christ on his way to Calvary.

Now, unlike our Catholic and Episcopal family and friends, as Presbyterians whose theology was forged in the Reformation – our tradition became hesitant to venerate saints. We believe we can pray directly to God without needing a saint to intercede for us, for example. And... frankly.... when you look up a few of the lesser known saints, you might even question their efficacy in accompanying us to the realm of heaven. There is Saint Brigid, for example, an abbess who was venerated for changing her bath water into beer and thereby keeping visiting clergy happy. Or St. Kevin of Ireland, who fed his lucky community for some time on salmon brought to him miraculously by an otter. Or, my personal favorite, St. Sithney who was asked by God to be the patron saint of girls, but who refused the task saying that girls would pester him for fine clothes and husbands and never leave him a moment's peace. And so God, perhaps intending a bit of divine humor asked him to look after mad dogs instead, to which Sithney replied, "I'd rather have mad dogs than women any day." ¹

¹ *Oxford Dictionary of Saints.*

The Oxford Dictionary of the Saints throws them all together... the sweet ones and strange ones, the extraordinarily brave and bizarre ones, the saints whose names are remembered for acts of faith. By the Fourth Century, the calendar had run out of days for all these saints and martyrs, and so one day, November 1st, was designated “All Saints.”

Our observance of All Saints is in keeping with church tradition to recognize all those who have gone before us in faith, and also the biblical tradition of the Apostle Paul who called the people of the early church “saints” – not because of the miracles they performed, but because they were trying to be holy. They were trying to live lives set apart for the purposes of God. As the old Book of Common worship remembers them in prayer saying, “the high and holy ones, who have sought God in the darkness, held fast to their faith in trial, and led lives of kindness and mercy toward others as they had opportunity.”

Those are the saints we remember this day. The people of faith we have known who were, like all of us, a mixture of saint and sinner, the ordinary and extraordinary, but who “sought God in the darkness, and held fast to their faith in trial, and led lives of kindness and mercy toward others.”

Our scripture reading today gives us a model for this kind of sainthood. One of the memorable most bible characters, Zacchaeus is a “compact mix of familiar ingredients in the odd concoction of sainthood. He was a sinner – a chief tax collector which meant he worked for the oppressive regime of Rome and made his money off of others. But he was also winsome, doggedly determined, reckless, wildly generous and splendidly unself-conscious.” Somewhere in his movement from climbing up a tree to see Jesus, to sitting at table with Jesus, from seeking God to being found in the presence of Christ, Zacchaeus gives us a picture of what it means to be a saint – in the eyes of God.

For the biblical understanding of sainthood is not about being perfect, so much as it is *trying to be holy*, set apart for the purposes of God, and that's what happens to Zacchaeus when his life is dramatically changed by an encounter with Jesus. He enters the gospel story for no reason other than simple curiosity. "He was trying to see Jesus," Luke tells us.

He comes into the narrative the way people sometimes come to church, curious to see what's going on. Zacchaeus just wanted a look. What he'd heard about Jesus, we do not know. What prompted his curiosity we can only guess, but somehow, somewhere, he had seen or heard something that caused him to wonder. With his great wealth, most of what Zacchaeus needed, he could get for himself; what he wanted, he could purchase. Perhaps his curiosity may have been simply born of the recognition that he needed something he could neither buy nor get for himself. So he climbed up in the sycamore tree, and he got vastly more than he bargained for.

Patrick Willson has written, "Jesus welcomed himself into Zacchaeus' life like he owned the place. And that may be the point Luke was making. Because Zacchaeus' story is also our story, we know something of what happens when Jesus makes himself welcome – in our lives."²

The word Jesus uses to describe what happens to Zacchaeus that day is salvation. Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house!" And that word – salvation is really what makes Zacchaeus a little saint – and all the rest of us too – for that matter. To be saved – is a loaded and often misunderstood theological concept. What exactly does Jesus mean when he says Zacchaeus met his salvation? First of all, in our Reformed tradition, salvation is a process – it's not a once and for all moment. By faith, we accept that we are sinful people who fall short of God's full

² Jon Walton, "The Eyes of our Hearts," 10/26/03, reference to the 1946 *Book of Common Worship*.

expectations for our lives, but God pronounces us “good” anyway. We are justified not by our own merit, but purely by God’s grace. Then we have opportunity to work out our salvation according to Paul, because we are sanctified. All that means is that, being upheld by God’s grace, we live our lives in grateful response, and strive to become what we are not yet.

Our salvation in Christ, you see – has a past tense, a present tense and a future tense. To be saved means to be free from sin, and to be free for service, free to live joyfully for God and in love, peace and justice among others. That’s why the pronouncement of salvation which Jesus makes in the home of Zacchaeus makes him a saint. Zacchaeus is moved to share his wealth with the poor, but even more than that, he opens the doors of his heart to the life only Jesus can give.

Zacchaeus was a little saint, not because he was small in stature, but because he took his flawed and broken life into the presence of the living God. “Half my possessions I will give to the poor,” he said to Jesus, “and if I have defrauded anyone I will pay them fourfold.” He sought to be transformed to the image of Christ himself, and thereby restored to right relationship with God, with himself and with others.

The whole church of Jesus Christ is made up of little saints like Zacchaeus, sinners seeking a holiness we can only find through Jesus Christ. That is how God works in the lives of all the saints. Over time, often quietly, slowly, using our curiosity, planting seeds of faith along the way so that we find ourselves wanting to get a better look at Jesus, and in so doing discover we have already been found.

AMEN.