

Date: November 6, 2005

**SUNDAY:** All Saints

**SERMON: The Company of the Blessed**

Text(s): Rev. 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

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When we lived in France, one of our favorite places to visit was the city of Rouen in Normandy. Most of the city had been bombed flat during the Allied invasion in 1944, but about 700 of the houses and buildings in the old city remain, and the old city is a living museum of the style of architecture that we call Tudor, but which the French call Norman.

In the very middle of the old market square, which is now a central tourist location, with a lot of mediocre restaurants that cater to the busloads of tourists who come, there is one very large and very striking piece of contemporary architecture in the very center of that ancient square, that is one of Carol's and my favorite places to visit. It's the church of St. Joan of Arc. Joan occupies the place in the French pantheon of heroes that George Washington does in America's. Just as one can find lots of places in one's travels around the eastern seaboard claiming that George Washington slept here, so you can find the same sorts of places around France associated with Joan of Arc.

But the church in Rouen really is something special. It's built on the exact spot where Joan was burned at the stake for heresy in 1431, the victim of collaboration between her countrymen and church officials and their English enemies, during the Hundred Years war. She had become a danger to those on all sides of that brutal and bloody conflict who had interests in perpetuating that war, and so, in a devil's deal, her Burgundian captors sold her to the English, who in turn, handed her over to pro-English church leaders who gave her a show trial and quickly burned her for heresy—the heresy of believing that God had spoken to her and called her to her mission of saving the monarchy of France.

From the outside, the new church is all weird curves, swoops, and elongated tails, but inside, it is one of the most beautiful, peaceful, and intimate worship spaces I've ever been in. Every detail of the architecture, from the upturned boat design to the window coverings of sailcloth cut in the shape of fish, is a significant symbol of Christian faith. It is a veritable “ark of safety.” The layout of the interior is in a large U-shape, with the pews in a semi-circle around the chancel and altar, and behind the altar, the entire wall of the church is made up of the 12<sup>th</sup> century stained-glass windows that were taken out of an older church and preserved in a cave during World War II. Subsequently the older church was bombed, and so the windows came to the church of St. Joan when it was built in the 1960's. We never went to Rouen without spending some time just sitting and praying or meditating in that church.

My favorite memory, however, was from the visit we made there on All Saints Day one year. Just outside the door of the church, there's a lovely courtyard garden that now surrounds the rock on which the pile of wood was placed where Joan was burned. Facing that grim reminder, there is a lovely life-sized statue of Joan herself, a young maiden in a flowing gown, her face with a look of ecstasy upturned in prayer. And for the feast of All Saints, someone had draped her statue in a huge circular blanket of pink and white chrysanthemums. What a lovely and fitting tribute that was to one of the church's most unlikely, yet strangely compelling and beloved saints.

All Saints is a day the church has set aside to remember and give thanks for the great company of faithful men and women who have modeled for us in varied ways what it means to be a follower of Christ. Some of them, like Joan, were officially recognized by the Catholic church in its formal process of canonization. The process began for her 35 years after her death when the church finally admitted that it had made a terrible mistake and committed a terrible evil by burning her as a heretic and gave her the status of martyr

instead. That formal process ended in 1920, nearly 500 years after her martyrdom. We've been hearing about how that formal process is already underway, in unusually short time, for Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She modeled a certain kind of compassion for the lowest and least of suffering humanity that we only rarely see, and she combined that compassion with a talent for administration that brought her work to the attention of the world, and more importantly, extended the work of her order to many other places in the world. Now, partisans of Pope John Paul II have been urging for the canonization process to begin for him, though he's not yet been dead a year.

That formal process of declaring people saints strikes most Protestants as a little strange, I suspect. We don't have a formal process for singling out certain dead Christians and naming them saints; we tend to favor St. Paul's habit of referring to all Christians as saints. But formal process or no, we do venerate exemplary Christians in less structured, but no less fervent ways. We honor or even revere the founders of our particular denominational traditions, like Martin Luther, John Calvin, or John Wesley. And if we American Protestants were into formal canonization, it's a safe bet that some would be gearing up to declare Martin Luther King, Jr. or evangelist Billy Graham as candidates for sainthood, even though the latter is still living. By their respective admirers, they are no less venerated than any of the more formally-named saints in the Catholic or Orthodox traditions.

But whether formally or in less structured ways, the church has always paid honor and attention to the lives of exemplary Christians, even when they were not as well-known or when they lived a very long time ago.

Not all saints have gained the widespread recognition of a St. Joan or St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa. But there are many who were no less people of love and compassion and whose lives are, in the words of the older communion

liturgy, "holy examples for us to follow." Some of them may have been members of our family—an aunt or uncle, a mother or grandmother who modeled for us the way of discipleship. That's why this is one of my favorite days in the church calendar; it gives us the opportunity to remember that we do not travel this Christian pilgrimage alone. We are part of the great company of the saints.

We remind ourselves of this fact every time we pray those lines in the Great Thanksgiving prayer during the communion service, "And so with the whole company of heaven and all your people now on earth, we praise your holy name and join their unending hymn...." Do we ever let the truth of that prayer sink in to our consciousness? If we don't we're missing out on one aspect of our faith that can be a source of great comfort and hope. It's especially important, I believe, for times when our faith is being tested, either by some personal tragedy or severe trial, or when events in the larger world around us fill us with fear or anxiety about the future. Then, of all times, we need to remember that we are not alone; we're part of the company of women and men that have traveled the road of life before us, and who have found a way to be people of the truth, people of love, people who are peacemakers, people who act out of purity of heart, purity of motives, even amid persecution or disaster or war.

Knowing that Christians before us have wrestled with the same issues, the same problems, the same choices that we wrestle with, can give us perspective on our own times. Always, the people of God have had to choose whether to give their highest allegiance to God or to Caesar. Always Christians have had to choose whether to live only for their own interests and work only to advance their own agendas or to give of themselves generously and sacrificially to meet the needs of others who are less fortunate or marginalized or excluded by their societies. Always Christians have faced adversity and

personal hardship and have had to choose whether to give in to hopelessness and despair or to hold on to hope and act with confidence and trust in God's future.

C. S. Lewis once said that though Christians may disagree with one another on whether it is appropriate to pray *to* the saints, all Christians agree that we pray *with* the saints. So whether or not we actually address our prayers to the saints asking for their help (which often will be decided by which particular denominational tradition we grew up in), all of us are part of that company of the saints who have already finished their labors on earth and now are eternally in the presence of God. They are that great "*cloud of witnesses*" that the writer of the Epistle to Hebrews says surrounds us. They are the "*multitude whom no one can number,*" as the visionary pastor of the Book of Revelation tells us in our lesson this morning. They are those who stand before the throne of God and who have been faithful witnesses to God in their lives. They are with us and we are with them, and our prayers are joined to theirs. We stand on their shoulders.

Our Gospel text this morning, which we call The Beatitudes, is really a kind of manual for sainthood. It's a listing of the qualities of life that God wants for all people, and which give to life the quality of blessedness or radiant happiness. It's quite obvious that it doesn't exactly match very well with the standards and values in popular culture or our society's definition of happiness. Our society doesn't normally associate qualities such as peacemaking, humility, poverty of spirit, meekness, purity of heart or compassion with happiness. But God does. And the world functions best, human life most nearly approaches God's intentions for it, when people relate to one another in these ways. It is these qualities that set those who possess them apart, which is what the word "saint" means—one who is set apart..

Now this is a little different from the rather cynical definition of a saint that the 19th century humorist Ambrose Bierce gave. He said, "A saint is a dead sinner, revised and edited." We're all familiar with that sort of saint, aren't we? We've all known people who may have been self-centered, unloving, or just downright worthless while they were alive, but as soon as they're dead, they begin to take on an aura of holiness in the memories of their family.

While admitting the all-too frequent accuracy of Ambrose Bierce's definition of a saint, I prefer the definition given by a six-year old Sunday School student. The teacher had taken the class into the sanctuary one Sunday morning on All Saints. She pointed out the people who were pictured in the beautiful stained-glass windows. There were the apostles, Mary Magdalene, the Holy Family, and others from the gospel stories. She told the class about these people and why they were important for us to remember. And she said that by seeing them in the stained glass windows every Sunday while the congregation worshiped, we could feel that they were part of our church too. At the end of the class, she asked, "Now let's review. Who can tell me what a saint is." And this little six-year old girl, who was enthralled by the beauty of the sun pouring through the stained glass, spoke up and said, "A saint is somebody with light shining through them."

She was exactly right, wasn't she? Humility, meekness, peacemakers, seekers of justice, single-minded in devotion to God, forgiving—these are the qualities which make us transparent and allow the light of God's new creation to shine through us. And none of them are qualities reserved for extraordinary people with extraordinary gifts or talents. None of them are beyond our reach. A. W. Tozer once said that everyone of us can be as holy as we want to be. If we want to know the blessedness that Jesus describes, we can. All of these qualities, if we seek them and allow them to grow in our lives by

cultivating them, will give to ordinary people like us an extraordinary glow that will shine out into the darkness and light the way for others who are groping or struggling to find their way home.

So as we gather around the Lord's table this morning and say those words, "with the whole company of heaven, and all your people now on earth . . ." let's remember and give thanks for our own dear and faithful departed who are now among that great white-robed company around the throne of God, who are yet with us and are teaching us to praise God with our lives as they did.