

Date: November 7, 2004

SUNDAY: All Saints

SERMON: Ethics for Saints (and other sinners)

Text(s): Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-32

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As I was growing up, and even into my adulthood, one of the things that distinguished Roman Catholics from Protestants, in my understanding, was that Roman Catholics venerated and even prayed to dead people they called saints, and Protestants didn't. My Catholic friends all had little statues of St. Christopher on the dashboard of their cars. And then there were all those "St. Jude, (or St. Anthony) pray for me" personal notices in the classified section of the newspaper. It just seemed really weird to me.

And when we went to live in Europe, we found ourselves immersed in a culture where the veneration of saints is so deeply embedded, that even in highly secular countries like France, where hardly anyone is associated with an organized religion any more, they still announce which saint's day it is every evening on the national news. Can you imagine Peter Jennings or Tom Brokaw doing that? In fact, as you know if you've spent any time in Europe at all, the reason many of the great cathedrals exist was to house some precious body part or article of clothing. The cathedral at Chartres, for example, was built to house what I've facetiously called "Mary's nightie,"—a chemise that is still kept in a vault and brought out on rare occasions for public viewing. And one would never guess that the French are so secular a people when you see the long lines on Good Friday in front of Notre Dame waiting for the chance to view the Crown of Thorns, the holy relic that virtually created the nation of France.

Of course we realize now that Protestants also have saints that they venerate, though without the process of official canonization and theological structure surrounding it. Protestants sort of drift into sainthood. I remember how excited my Presbyterian colleagues were when at

our international pastors' conferences, we visited Geneva and got to see John Calvin's chair, or the sense of awe that many of them displayed when we visited Calvin's birthplace in Noyon, France. Protestants, being the iconoclasts they are, generally don't attach as much importance to images, statues, body parts, or articles of clothing as Catholics, but there must be some reason why at the Methodist Archives at Drew University, one of the items in the collection is the little finger of the 18th century evangelist George Whitfield. We tend to go in more for plaques with words on them. Those of you sitting in the 9th pew back this morning will have noticed, perhaps, that you're sitting where two local saints once sat— St. Joshua and St. Harriet.

What is this thing the church has had down through its history with all these saints, whether Catholic or Protestant, whether officially canonized or not? What's the deal? And why should we care enough about them that we observe a festival day on the church calendar called the Feast of All Saints?

There are two main reasons why this feast is important to us, and why it is fitting that we should keep the memories of the saints alive. Each of our scripture lessons this morning give us the clues to these two main reasons.

In the epistle to the *Ephesians*, the writer addresses his letter "*to the saints who are in Christ Jesus.*" This is a complex passage, and we don't have time to go into it in detail this morning, but we should notice that the writer isn't singling out particular exemplary persons for special notice because of their deep piety or heroic faith; rather he means every person who is linked to the Risen Christ in faith and hope. The term "saints" is one of the most common ways the New Testament writers refer to the church. It simply means "those who are called out or set apart." And that's a fair description of what it means to be a Christian. We are called out and set apart from the rest of the world because we have staked our lives on the future we have glimpsed in what the biblical writers call "the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." In a

world where death's ubiquity and power appears to be omnipotent, we confess that we do not believe that it is. We believe in the ultimate triumph of life. This is the rich inheritance our writer speaks of. By faith and hope, we grasp the truth that our destiny and the destiny of the whole creation is not death, but life. So we live our lives by a different guiding star than the unbelieving world does. That faith sets us apart and defines who we are and how we live. We are saints—the called out ones.

Not only are we saints by virtue of being set apart by our faith in God's future glimpsed in the resurrection of Christ, we are indissolubly linked together with all others who also are in Christ by faith and hope, and who acknowledge that the Risen Christ is presently the Lord of time and history. The writer speaks of "*the church, which is Christ's body.*" Together we are more than just a group of believing individuals; we are a corporate reality. We are the body of Christ. And this is more than simply a metaphorical way of speaking. If Christ is truly risen, then the community of Christians is Christ's visible presence in the world. Whatever else the resurrection of Jesus from the dead means, it means that Christ is no longer bound by space and time in one human body in one geographical location. Christ is now a universal corporate person made visible in the Christian community, a community that transcends both time and geography.

We sang it in our opening hymn, "*Yet we on earth have union with God, the Three in One, and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.*" We will say it in our communion liturgy today as we do time after time: "*Therefore, with the whole company of the saints who dwell in eternal light, and with all your people now on earth, we join in their unending hymn of praise.*" And yet so often we forget or neglect to allow that truth to shape and guide the way we live. The Feast of All Saints gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves of that truth once

again and let it become the focus of our attention. We are not alone in this world; we are part of the great company of the saints, not only the company of all Christians now alive, but the company of all God's people who have lived and died in faith and borne witness to their hope in the ultimate triumph of God and good.

So we remember that we are part of a great company, but why do we remember certain individuals in special ways? Why has the church preserved the memory of certain individuals, either officially calling them saints with "St." in front of their names or unofficially venerating them as such? Why do we remember long-dead saints like St. Francis of Assisi, the apostle to the poor or not-so-long dead people like Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest, who voluntarily took the place of a condemned prisoner in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, and whose death cell you may visit if you should go there? Why remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and pastor who worked against Hitler in the German Resistance and ultimately was hanged, or Albert Schweitzer who gave up a brilliant theological and musical career in Europe and took up medicine to care for people living in an underdeveloped part of Africa, or Mother Teresa who ministered to the homeless and dying in Calcutta?

We do it—and this is the second main reason—because they have been living models of the ethics and values of the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks of in our gospel lesson for today. Those ethics sound impossibly naïve to people trained in the *realpolitik* of the world. "*Blessed are the poor?*" "*Woe to you who are rich?*" "*Love your enemies?*" "*Bless those who curse you?*" "*Turn the other cheek?*" "*Give to everyone who begs from you?*" Give me a break! If we really believed that, we'd have to live in some other world. Well, precisely! To be a saint means that we are called to live as citizens of another world, citizens of the commonwealth of heaven. And that means we have to live by

different values and practice different ethics than those around us practice who do not identify themselves as citizens of that heavenly commonwealth. We have to reorder our priorities, set different goals, march to a different drummer.

But from where we sit, with a mortgage to be paid and tuition bills coming due and anxious about job security and frustrated with high property taxes and fearful of terrorism and disturbed about war, those values can sometimes seem like an impossible dream—a nice dream to be sure, but a dream nonetheless. We just don't see how we could really live that way in the world as it is. Someone would have to demonstrate that it was actually possible to do it.

Well, some have. And that's why we remember or venerate certain people as saints. In their lives we see some vital aspect of the ethics of heaven, not articulated in abstract theological propositions, but lived out in flesh and blood. The saints were real people like us; they had all the same problems, and worse ones that we do. Some of them were eccentrics, and by the standards of today's psychology might even be considered neurotic. St. Theresa of Avila, a saint of heroic faith and immense achievement by anyone's standards, almost certainly suffered from what we call today "bipolar disorder." The best of them had their feet of clay, as we do. Yet in their lives, we recognize something authentic, something true, something holy, something that cuts right across the grain of the world as it is and gives us a vision of the world as it might be.

In my church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, there was a man named Dave Williams. Dave was recently retired when I first arrived in that parish, and all his life, he'd lived in the center of the city of New Brunswick. He had worked with the Union Carbide Corporation for many years, and had been a member of the church for most of the years that he'd lived there. At the time I was there, Dave's house was located right in the middle of some of the worst urban

poverty in the city. He had seen the city and the neighborhood deteriorate around him, and it really disturbed him. It especially disturbed him when all of his white neighbors began to flee the city for the suburbs, and the area around Dave's house increasingly became a ghetto of poor African Americans and Latinos. In the 1970's, about a block or two from Dave's house, HUD erected two high-rise buildings for low-income residents, and "the projects" as they were called became a concentrated center of poverty, crime, and violence.

Dave wasn't a particularly pious person. He didn't wear his religion in ways that called attention to it, but his Christianity went deep. It was in his bones. He got angry enough at the injustice and poverty all around him, that he decided that he had to stay there instead of moving to the suburbs. So he did. And he made it a point to get to know his new neighbors, whether they were white or black, middle-class or poor people on welfare, he knew them, and he cared about them, and they knew he cared about them. How did they know? Dave just took to heart some simple things Jesus said about loving one's neighbor. So when there was an older woman in the neighborhood who needed to get to the doctor for a checkup, Dave would drive her in his car. If a home-bound person needed groceries, Dave went to the supermarket. If a young mother on welfare with small children had a broken window that needed to be fixed, Dave would show up with his toolbox. When he saw teenagers hanging out on the street corner and dealing drugs, he not only got in their face and confronted them, but he took them along with him to do something good for a neighbor in need. When our church began an after-school tutoring program at the elementary school near his home, he spent every Tuesday afternoon with his white head bent over a desk next to a small black-haired child patiently helping to sort out the mysteries of math. On Friday nights when it was our church's turn to cook and serve the meal to

the homeless poor at the soup kitchen, Dave was on hand to wait tables, set up chairs or wash pots and pans in the kitchen. And when there was the opportunity to advocate with the city authorities for the rights of the poor, he did it.

Did Dave believe that the values of the kingdom of God are too radical and impractical for this world? Not on your life. He didn't make speeches or preach sermons about them; he left that to his pastor. He just lived them.

So when I stand at the Lord's table this morning, and say those words about joining with all God's people and all the hosts of heaven in praise and thanksgiving, Dave Williams, ordinary man, but extraordinary saint, will be among those in my own personal company of saints. He'd turn over in his grave if he knew I was referring to him as a saint, but he was one nonetheless. And so are we all called to be saints, God's holy people, God's set-apart ones, who by our lives and by our faithfulness to the way of Jesus, testify to our hope in the ultimate triumph of God's justice.