

Saints are Servants
Rev. David Reynolds
Matthew 23: 1-12

Well, it's All Saints' Sunday. You know, it's the Sunday that comes immediately after Halloween. All Saints' Day, proper, is always November 1st the *day* after Halloween. Historically, All Saints' Day was how the church responded to the Irish pagan celebration of Samhain, which was a harvest festival thought of as a festival of the dead. Thus all the association with ghosts and ghouls. The church's response in All Saints' Day was to proclaim the message of the gospel, the message of life in the face of that festival of death. It was to say: that dominion of death, that dominion of sin and oppression and injustice that our scriptures name as death, that dominion does not have ultimate power over us. Rather, the God of resurrection, the God of life has the last word.

So, we *don't* have to be afraid of death and its mystery, or of those who wield the powers of death. In light of that, someone was musing as to why we in the church don't encourage our children to dress up like saints on Halloween. I mean its really just a fun day for kids now, but why not proclaim the church's message right in the middle of it? So, this person asked, "why not dress as an old worn-down woman with scars from beatings by cruel overseers? That would be Sojourner Truth, a saint who gained freedom from slavery and preached the gospel of liberation to a prejudiced" people. Or why not dress in a "plain white shirt with a stethoscope and a big handlebar mustache? This would be Albert Schweitzer, a saint who gave his life as a missionary and doctor in Africa, even though he could have remained in Europe, living in luxury and fame. Why not dress in a black suit and a simple tie, with a dark mustache, carrying a Bible? This would be Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a saint who gave his life trying to end racial discrimination in America."

And that, of course, leads us further into just how we in the church define what a saint is. I mean, think about it. Can the mentally retarded man who really can't speak, much less go through a confirmation class, or even know what it means to profess Jesus Christ as his savior, but who is there at the church door handing out bulletins every Sunday, can he be a saint? Judging from the scriptures for today, I think Jesus would say yes. Jesus seems to say, doesn't he, that it has to do with serving. It has to do with offering the gifts you have to the world in love, and that that happens not because of us so much as because of a faithful, loving God, who makes Himself present in and through us.

It gets confusing to be sure. A lot gets in the way. In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, we again see the Pharisees. Now, according to the cultural and religious standards of the time if anyone were equipped for sainthood, it was the Pharisees. The Pharisees, you remember, were the deeply religious, moral, proper, upright citizens. And says Jesus, they taught about important things. But, they were not servants. Says Jesus, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." That is, they were really focused on stating and upholding the standards that everyone should meet, but they did nothing in the way of loving and serving those people who were not meeting those standards in ways that could have transformed their lives.

No, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, they were on their own, same as everybody else, "here's the standard, meet it." "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." Or, as my former church member I told you about last week said: "Why should I give my money to feed starving people in China? They're communists." You know, they aren't meeting the proper standard, so why should I help *them*? Did the Pharisees really believe that they had gotten where they had on their own, independent of the grace of God, supporting them in their lives in countless ways? For Jesus, the very fact that the Pharisees were not interested in loving and serving those

who were not meeting their standards revealed that those standards were not really about serving or upholding God at all! They weren't about what would glorify God in living life together in a way that is in line with the Kingdom. They were really about maintaining their own privileged place when they compared themselves with others.

It is confusing. We often end up getting focused on drawing and holding the line, don't we, and forget all about just what purpose those lines are supposed to be serving. We end up being about being properly moral and properly religious, holding to the proper "family values," or making this or that particular profession of faith in the right lord. And we think that life is somehow all about getting all these others to do the same as we have done. Not that we're saints, or anything, because in our hierarchical thinking, although we are obviously better off than all these others who need to do the same as us, we know we are no Mother Teresa. So, we reserve sainthood for kind of persons we think of as somehow a different breed, and put them on a pedestal.

But, you see, just that quickly all these properly religious and moral values we want to draw the line on and maintain become about us and our standing. Where is the love of God and what God longs for and works for in human hearts and lives and in our lives together in all of that? How are we really being part of *that*? So, how do we give up our hierarchies? Because you see, they only become the basis for judgmental exclusion on the one hand, or for resentment toward others who are "higher up" the ladder on the other, or for all our excuses for not living lives of love.

Listen to Jesus. Saints are to be servants. And we learn what that means from Jesus. The only line we as Christians draw is for ourselves. How am I embodying the inclusive love and service of Jesus? The only lines to be drawn are the outlines of Paradise, that is the outlines of the redemption God intends for life together on this earth: the Kingdom where injustice and oppression are resisted, where dignity is afforded each one, and each one's particular gifts are cherished and respected, and where wounds are ministered to. "The greatest among you will be your servant," Jesus says. One who has learned what that means from the Messiah who took the form of a slave. He's describing the saints. Saints are servants. Friends, saints are not saints because of their heroic deeds, or their moral, virtuous character, or because of meeting some religious prerequisites. They are saints because of a God who is faithful and who dwells in us and strengthens us and calls us on.

I'm going to tell you about my grandfather. I know you've heard it all before. My grandfather was very active in his church. But, you know, he didn't talk much "churchy" stuff. He was much more interested in life. He was delighted by people! And bluegrass music, and baseball, the beauty of the mountains of western North Carolina. You see where I got all that. But, back at church what he did was he worked with the youth. And I know when I first heard that, and every time it was talked about after that, I was extremely jealous! I knew what those kids were getting! They were getting on a weekly basis what I could only get for a couple of weeks in the summer, or maybe a Christmas every once in a while. I knew what they were getting. And what they were getting was an unconditional love that delighted in the uniqueness of each one of them, and that was not interested in telling them how they didn't measure up. He could see all those things as well as anybody, like we all can. But, he wasn't interested in dwelling on them. He was interested in the good things he saw, in the things that delighted him about them, in letting them know how special they were. I think he was only interested in serving them and loving them after the manner of Jesus. He died of a heart attack, a man of 72 who had already had a previous heart attack, helping to dig the grave of a cousin. Because, he was a servant.

I've known some other people like him, and some of them don't want to go to church, don't want anything to do with church. And you know what, it's not because they don't like Jesus and how he lived and what he teaches. And it's not because they disagree with the vision for life

together that Jesus embodied and name the Kingdom of God. And in fact, most of them pray and so, have a relationship with God, or with a power beyond themselves, no matter how they name it. But, they don't want anything to do with church because of what they've experienced of Christians focused on things that really don't have any deep connection with life, things that get used and experienced as exclusionary status markers, and reasons not to value someone as highly as someone else. You know, I don't think it's an accident that in the passage from the Revelation of John that was read earlier, that John in his vision that he has, that he doesn't recognize who this multitude is who stand before the throne of God.

You remember? In his vision he says he looked, "and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." And the elder asked him who they are, and where they've come from and he doesn't know! He says, "*you're* the one that knows." You know, "heck if I know, you tell me." I don't think that's an accident. And here's what it means: we don't get to set the criteria of who God's saints are. You know, if John got to set the criteria, he would have recognized who those people were and why they were there! And we can probably be pretty sure his criteria wouldn't have included a multitude from every nation and all tribes and peoples! But, the elder says, "These are those who have come out of the great ordeal; they've washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." That is, these are those who have taken up the same cross as Jesus, the cross of resistance to injustice, and prejudice and scapegoating, for the sake of service to those who need help, for the sake of valuing all. That's how and why Jesus shed his blood, and they've stood in that line behind him.

Friends, if we would make the criteria any *less* than loving and serving people who need our help, as our Lord does, then we don't get to say what it means to wash in the blood of the Lamb. So, a better way is just to give thanks and look for ways to serve, isn't it? To give thanks for a faithful and loving God who dwells within us and acts through us and through countless others, a multitude beyond our limitations, for the sake of renewing and redeeming our life together on this earth. It is why we come to this meal and begin with The Great Thanksgiving. We give thanks! Thank God for sustaining us in body and soul. Thank God for sustaining our lives together. Thank God for redeeming them. Thank God for doing all this by indwelling in us and in so many countless others who have gone before. Praise God for all the saints and for the continuing opportunity to serve.

Amen.