

The Who and What of Sainthood – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149; Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

You've probably been wondering why we weren't in church two Sundays ago. Two weeks ago, on October 20th, we were in the town where I grew up—Olney, Illinois, ninety miles southeast of here. We were there to celebrate the one hundred year anniversary of the Olney Free Methodist Church, the only church I attended up until the time I went to college.

I don't know how much Brad and Mathea enjoyed celebrating the centennial year of the church I grew up in, but I had a lot of fun seeing childhood friends I hadn't seen for decades, looking at embarrassing pictures of us all, and remembering the heritage I inherited because of the people who have committed themselves to being a church at the corner of Camp and Cherry Streets in Olney, Illinois, over the past century.

I thought about Grandpa Bruce Cullison, the founder of the church. He wasn't my real grandpa, but all the kids called him grandpa. He lived to be at least 103, so in my memory he'll always be 100 years old. We always knew when it had been a really good sermon or service because Grandpa Cullison would get up near the end, take out his white hankie, and walk up and down the long center aisle of the church waving the hankie in the air as he shouted his praises to God. "Hal-le-lu-jah!" "Praise the Lord!" And as he tilted his head back and closed his eyes, "Come Jesus, come." It always made the kids giggle. Sometimes it made me a little nervous that Jesus might return before I had a chance to run around the church with my friends after the service. After all, how could God not hear Grandpa Cullison? And sometimes it served as a trigger for other elderly adults to join in, and all the kids knew that meant church wasn't going to end anytime soon.

I also thought about Beulah Poland. She was one of Grandpa Cullison's daughters and the grandmother of my good friend, Dee Dee. I will forever associate green beans with Beulah because whenever we went to her house, whether she knew beforehand that we were going to visit or not, before we had even crossed the threshold, she was telling us about the pot of freshly picked or home-canned green beans she had just cooked and the fresh crescent rolls she had made to go with them that were waiting for us in her kitchen. We knew never to go to her house if we weren't hungry because it wasn't possible to have less than two or three helpings without offending her or knowing that she would worry about our malnourishment for the rest of the day. Besides feeding me green beans, Beulah also cared for my younger brother when he was a baby and toddler. My brother Steve was born prematurely and was quite underweight as an infant, so rather than playing with him, Beulah spent most of her time trying to coax him to eat in order to "fatten him up" she would say.

I also remembered my youth group leaders, Carolyn and Jim Horton who I never heard say an unkind word about anyone, and Millie and Rex Parnell who are still active in the church. They

treated me like their fifth daughter. As our Bible Quiz team coach, Millie drove us all over the Wabash Conference of the Free Methodist Church so we could compete in Bible quiz tournaments. She even paid us a silver dollar for each chapter of the Bible that we memorized. Money like food is a great motivator to a teenager.

Connie and Jerry Harriss were a young couple that worked with the church youth group when I was in high school. When I went away to college, they gave me a paperweight that said "Think big!" When I turned it over, I saw that they had attached a piece of masking tape to the bottom. On it they had written their phone number and the words "Call collect if you need anything." (You kids probably don't know what it means to "call collect," so you'll need to ask your parents at lunch today.)

When I think back to my childhood and adolescence, I think of the Olney Free Methodist Church and people like these as having the greatest impact on my life during that time. That doesn't mean the church didn't have problems. We had plenty of them. In fact, sometimes it seemed like we went through pastors faster than paper towels. But the work of God through people like these that I remember this morning has for a century continued despite the church's imperfections.

Today we remember All Saints Day on the church calendar. It was actually this past Thursday on November 1st, but this is the Sunday on the church calendar that it is remembered. In the Free Methodist Church we don't have an official act that our bishops perform in order to declare someone a saint. In the Roman Catholic Church, it is the Pope's responsibility and privilege to bestow that status on a deceased person declaring that that person "was holy and is now in heaven with God." The Roman Catholic Church requires that two miracles be attributable to a person to qualify for canonization. In 2006 when the church was trying to clarify the difference between canonization and beatification, Pope Benedict explained that "In addition to reassuring us that the servant of God lives in heaven in communion with God, miracles are the divine confirmation of the judgment expressed by church authorities about the virtuous life" lived by the candidate. In the Wesleyan tradition we don't dedicate a lot of days throughout the year to celebrating the various and nearly endless list of saints who have been canonized throughout the church's history, but some churches in our tradition like us do choose to remember All Saints Day.

So what is a saint for us in 2013? Each of our passages for today helps us think about this question. Let's begin by looking at our apocalyptic passage from Daniel. We are given just seven verses from a passage in chapter seven in which Daniel recounts a vision he had of a final judgment day, of the resurrection of the dead, and of a kingdom in which the saints take their rightful place. The details of Daniel's vision are much more menacing than my short summary suggests though. The second verse tells us that the "four winds of heaven [stirred] up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another." While most of us today don't believe that great monsters lurk in the depths of the ocean, for the people

of Daniel's day, the sea was a dark and terrifying unknown. They had specific names for the monsters that lived in its depths.

These beasts that Daniel envisions are powerful. They strike fear in Daniel's heart. Compilers of today's lectionary readings must have been intent on maintaining a G rating because they left out all the gory, but great, details in Daniel's dream. These details give us a vivid image of what Daniel saw. Beginning with verse four in the section that is omitted from the middle of our reading today, we see creatures that might be found in Narnia or Middle-earth or "in a galaxy far, far away." Daniel said:

"The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, 'Arise, devour many bodies!' After this, as I watched, another appeared, like a leopard. The beast had four wings of a bird on its back and four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly."

These beasts are threatening, and according to the passage, Daniel isn't sure what to make of them and his vision. So he appeals to an interpreter for help understanding it. The interpreter says that the four beasts represent four powerful and dreadful kings and kingdoms that will or are already a threat to the Jews. But Daniel's vision doesn't end with these powerful beasts devouring the Jews. Beginning with verse nine which we also don't have in our reading for today, we learn that as Daniel watched the beasts, "an Ancient One" dressed in clothing as "white as snow" took his seat on the throne and judged the beasts. One was condemned to death and thrown into the fire, while the three others were convicted but allowed to continue living. Then "one like a human being" came down from heaven, not up out of the churning sea as the beasts had, and the Ancient One gave him "dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" forever. According to the interpreter in the last verse of our reading, this part of Daniel's vision means that ultimately "the holy ones of the Most High [will] receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever."

Rather than forecasting doom, Daniel's vision is a reminder to the "holy ones of the Most High"—the saints—that God through Christ Jesus the king will overpower the great beasts of the world—not through the power of "great iron teeth" and ten horns, but through the power of justice. If they are faithful even in adversity and persecution, they will possess the kingdom of God despite the threats of the world that surround them. So Daniel through this vision teaches

us that a saint must be faithful, even in adversity, so that they will have the kingdom of God forever.

Psalm 149 affirms this call of the saints to faithfulness as well as directs them to praise. In the New Revised Standard Version that we read together, the saints are identified as the “faithful,” and for the first six and a half verses of the psalm, they are instructed to participate in communal worship and praise. The last three and a half verses are where being a saint becomes more of a challenge. It is where, if we read the text literally, the pacifists among us may want to flee from sainthood. The psalm tells us that while the faithful have praises “in their throats,” they should at the same time have “two-edged swords in their hands.” They are told to “execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples.” They should “bind the kings” and deliver whatever judgment on them has been decreed. According to the psalm, this will be “glory for all his faithful ones.”

Besides continuing to be faithful, Psalm 149 instructs the saints to both praise God and execute justice. Some might use this psalm as an argument to take up arms against the unjust, but doing that denies that we live in a post-resurrection world. Christ redefined for us how to wield power by sacrificing himself for us all in the greatest act of love in human history. Because we live in a post-resurrection world, we must follow Christ’s model for bringing justice to bear against the beasts and other injustices of our day. The “two-edged swords” that we wield must be forged by the love that God gave us in Jesus.

Our epistle lesson affirms this divine-human partnership that the saints have with God. In the New Testament, the word “saints” is typically used to refer to the “Christians.” In Ephesians 1 Paul addresses the new Christians in Ephesus as “saints.” According to Paul, they share with all the saints in the “inheritance” of “redemption as God’s own people.” Paul emphasizes to the Ephesian Christians that by choosing to believe, they have not only inherited a place in the “communion of saints,” but along with that, they have inherited an “immeasurable” power, a power that they can use to help execute justice in the world.

The first half of today’s gospel lesson also affirms God’s plan for restoring justice to the world. In these verses from Luke, Jesus gives the poor wealth, the hungry food, the weeping laughter, and the persecuted heaven. That’s the kind of justice the saints hope to execute. But these aren’t the beatitudes that Matthew gives us. We can’t ignore the second half of Luke’s passage. We do get four “blessed.” But pay attention to what comes next. Woe! Woe! Woe! Woe! The rich, the full, the laughing, and the celebrated all have their situations reversed. What they have is taken away. What is Luke doing here? Who are the saints in this passage? Are they the poor or the rich? The hungry or the full? The weeping or the laughing?

Luke’s juxtaposition of these four woes against the four blessings should shock us because we need to be shocked and we need to be shaken when we are rich, full, laughing, and celebrated. When we have what we want, when we should be satisfied—as most of us here today should be—it is too easy to forget that we need God. It is easy to become self-sufficient and think that

we can take care of ourselves rather than trusting God. We can even believe that our sainthood is secure.

Luke shocks us back to the reality of our own tendencies and shows us the kind of power Jesus desires us to use to execute justice. It is not the power of force or of swords. It also isn't a meek power. It is a power of love—love that allows someone to strike us on both cheeks and take both our coat and our shirt as well. Love that gives and never wants anything in return.

In an All Saints Day sermon published in his book *Unleashing the Scriptures*, Stanley Hauerwas argues that “Saints. . .are not Luke Skywalkers—that is, they are not heroes or heroines. Rather they are people like us who have been made more than we are by being engrafted into God’s kingdom that is ruled by the power of forgiveness and love.” Hauerwas goes on to say that “Even though we rightly remember particular Christians’ lives for sustaining our part in God’s adventure, we are mindful that it is God that makes their and our lives possible. So we celebrate the saints—and we should each name some for ourselves—but that celebration is about the victory of God alone who triumphed over the beast-kings.”

As I sat in the centennial celebration in Olney two weeks ago, I thought about the saints St. Paul’s has seen pass on—Sharon Brown, Phoebe Johnson, Albert and Geraldine Green, Harriet and Lester Whiteman, Guy Chase, Doris and Dick Buckta. Perhaps you can think of others. I wondered what St. Paul’s will be like when it’s a hundred years old. We’re only eighteen now, so we have quite a while to go. Most of us won’t be here at St. Paul’s centennial celebration, at least physically. What about in 32 years at our 50th anniversary? Will our children come back and reminisce about all our idiosyncrasies? You bet they will. But I’m also confident they will talk about how they all helped take offering on Sunday mornings when they were little, how they ran to the communion table at the end of the service and ate the remaining bread that Morgan Bristle or Jessica Chambers had baked fresh that morning, how they helped paint murals on the church walls and ceiling and sorted rocks that became a part of the church floor while philosophizing with that cool Rick McPeak, how we had potlucks every month and somehow there was always enough food, and how they sometimes went to the McPeak Compound on Sunday afternoon or evening where they played in the barn or caught crawdads in the pond. And hopefully they’ll remember how we strove to be a community of saints—how we tried to be faithful, how we praised God, and how we tried to enact justice in our world.

Last Sunday Jessica told us that we are depraved. This Sunday I’m telling you we are saints. We’re probably actually both—depraved saints. As we gather around the table today, let’s remember those who have gone before us and those who will be here when St. Paul’s is 100, and let’s rejoice that we all serve the same God who calls us to faithfulness and to justice and to love.