

What Does It Mean to be a Saint? – Teresa Holden

Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-23

Until I was about 8 years old, my family attended the Calvary Baptist Church in Oswego, Indiana. At this church, my Sunday School teachers worked very hard to embed Scripture within our minds and hearts, as we seem to have embarked on a lot of Scripture memorization projects, more than just a weekly Bible verse. I've talked before here – how I memorized as a child (with limited comprehension) the first chapter of the gospel of John. Similarly, when I was very young, a valiant attempt was made to lead my class to commit to memory Matthew's listing of the Beatitudes, which is similar to our Gospel reading for today. In both cases, these passages of Scripture are referred to as the Beatitudes (or Beauty-tudes, as my Sunday School class called them). The Beatitudes were next to impossible for me to learn. They were so completely un-intuitive to me. They just left me dumb-founded – why in the world would one be considered blessed if they were poor or hungry or crying or hated? These were not things that I wanted to be. Initially, I had a very hard time getting beyond the first Beatitude – “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” What in the world did that mean? I tried very hard to hide the extent to which this made no sense to me, and the exercise became just a matter of memorizing words in the correct order.

Ah, but then in the Spring of my first grade year, something happened to me on the playground of North Webster Elementary School, that in my little six year old mind caused me to believe I had experienced the fulfillment of a Beatitude. Out of nowhere on a beautiful spring day, Annette, a fellow classmate, pushed me into a mud puddle. I was completely stunned. To this day, I don't remember any instigating factors that would have caused her to do this. I only remember that Annette and I weren't really friends; we didn't play together frequently, and secretly I thought that she smelled bad. We were on the far side of the playground, in an area that was around the corner of the school building, and no teachers were around. Before I knew it, I was picking myself, dripping, out of dirty water. As my brain tried to make sense of what had just happened, the words of Matthew 5:10-11 popped into my head. All those words that I had memorized carefully one after another and that had previously been meaningless to me: “Blessed are ye when men revile you, and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad; for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets before you.” In that split second, I knew I had been persecuted for righteousness sake, and my reward was going to be very great, indeed. (Of course, this was ridiculous – I didn't even know what the words “persecuted for righteousness sake” even meant.) This certainly didn't stop me from tearfully telling on Annette as soon as I could find my teacher. (Perhaps I had gotten confused and thought that the verse, “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord” was somewhere in those Beatitudes.) Really, Annette probably pushed me in the mud puddle because she was just sick and tired of me being a precocious smarty-pants, and she felt the need to quiet my ceaseless jabber.

The good news about this incident is that, while I was being self-righteous and even conceited, at least I considered it important to be on God's team, to be a part of the group that God has blessed. We call those who are on God's team "saints." Today we are celebrating All Saint's Day. Today is Halloween, obviously, but tomorrow is All Saint's Day. The lectionary allows us the option of celebrating All Saint's Day today by offering us today's Scriptures for this celebration. Both of these holidays emerge from ancient religious rituals. The first, Halloween, originates from the Celts, and was popularized in America after waves of Irish immigrated here during the great potato famine. In America it usually doesn't carry the pagan religious definitions that accompanied it in ancient Celtic society, as it is largely considered to be a harmless, secular holiday. All Saint's Day, however, underscores the attempts by the Roman Church, early on, to turn those within its influence from pagan practices to pure and sacred celebrations. So the Catholic Church in the 7th Century originated All Saint's Day as a day to remember the Saints (with a capital "S") who have passed on.

As we celebrate All Saint's Day we recognize the fact that Catholics and Protestants differ about how they think about saints. Catholics distinguish that believers who attempt to follow Christ to the best of their abilities are saints, but with a small "s." They might define these saints as Nelson Mandela does. He says that the earthly definition of saints is: "sinners who keep on trying." Protestants would largely agree with this definition, that saints are believers within the Body of Christ who through faith have found atonement and redemption and are on a journey of increasing devotion and intimacy with God.

Catholics also recognize and celebrate saints whom they believe serve as intercessors for the Church even beyond their deaths. These Saints (with a big "S") have been identified as people who have lived remarkably sacrificial and pious lives (many of them were martyrs) and are (most often) associated with some sort of miraculous event. They go through an official process through which they are beatified (or officially recognized as a candidate for sainthood) by the Church and then after many years (sufficient time for people to verify and decide whether this person indeed qualifies for sainthood) they become canonized and officially become a Saint (with a big "S"). An example of someone you might be familiar with who is headed toward sainthood is Mother Theresa, who was beatified in 2003.

Saints (with a big "S"), Catholics believe, are constantly in intercession for the Church, and they can be asked to appeal to God on behalf of saints (with a small "s") who are in trouble on earth. Usually, they are recognized for a particular cause or ability that is associated with their life's story. So, for instance, St. Christopher was known for carrying a child across a rapidly moving river. In the course of the crossing, the child became ridiculously heavy, but Christopher persevered, and he is today recognized as the patron saint of travelers.

While we may disagree with these distinctions that are made between saints with a little "s" and saints with a big "S," there is something to be learned from the lives of those who are recognized as saints. It seems clear that most of them tried very hard to live the truth of the Beatitudes, the popular name for a list of blessings, like that which is found in Luke 6.

Reading Luke 6 now as an adult, I realize why I had such trouble with getting my mind around the Beatitudes as a young child. For my memory they were a stumbling block because everything seemed reversed to me. Wouldn't it make more sense to say that someone is blessed when they're rich; their tummies are full, they're laughing and loved. But according to Jesus, these are all "Woes." How can this be?

In Luke 6, Jesus is talking specifically to his disciples, within earshot of the huge crowds of people who have come to experience his miraculous presence. He has just experienced a series of challenges from religious leaders who have continuously been trying to catch Him in a mistake. These Jewish religious leaders wanted to maintain the status quo; they wanted to retain their positions which allowed them to impose taxes on Jewish people, alongside the taxes that were exacted by the Roman Empire. Biblical scholars suggest when Jesus emphasizes poverty and hardship, He is identifying with the masses of people who are His followers, as opposed to the religious leaders, and He is telling His disciples to do the same. To the masses He is delivering a message of hope, that as citizens of heaven they will know plenty, warmth and laughter, in contrast to the difficulty of their current lives, and in contrast to how their leaders lived. Some scholars suggest that only 1% of Jews in Jesus' day were elite. Very, very few Jews enjoyed any form of surplus or luxury, and those few that did were found in the company of religious leaders.

Amongst the saints (capital "S") whose lives we know much about, we find that many of them, as well, sought to identify with the downtrodden in life. A good example is Peter Claver, a Jesuit priest from Spain who lived from 1581-1654. Claver elected to live in Cartagena, Columbia which was one of the two major port cities in South America for the importation of slaves from Africa. Claver referred to himself as "a slave to the slave." His life's work involved meeting slave ships upon their arrival at port, and by virtue of his status as a priest, gaining entry and bringing food and medical aid to the slaves who had endured the horrendous trip from Africa. This involved descending into the hold of these ships in which slaves were chained, often naked and covered with human excrement in order to share the love of Jesus. Claver also baptized many of the slaves. While this may or may not have reflected an actual religious conversion, the fact of having been baptized a Christian did bring a measure of protection to a slave, as (at this early point in the history of transatlantic slave trade) it was against cultural standards to abuse a fellow Christian. Although he tried, Claver couldn't change the culture that perpetuated slavery, but he actively sought to alleviate the suffering of slaves. A conservative estimate of the number of slaves he baptized stands at 300,000. Peter Claver not only lived the Beatitudes, he also stepped into that difficult directive that Jesus gave – "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Our Ephesians and Daniel passages underscore that while Christians are to make great sacrifices, in doing so, they step into an eternity that is filled with blessings. The Beatitudes make clear that self-sacrifice and delay of gratification are the calling of Christians. Putting others well-being ahead of ourselves, we are called to what seems like an impossible standard of love and self-abnegation. Yet Ephesians and Daniel point out that choosing this life results in

a great inheritance. Daniel says, “But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever—forever and ever.” Ephesians places this inheritance in the present tense: “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.” This seems to be saying that the actual “[living] for the praise of his glory” is a part of the inheritance.

My personal experience of serving others underscores the extent to which we step into a slice of heaven by using the gifts God has given us for someone else. I’ve often told people that over the course of a semester, when I’ve observed Greenville College students tutoring high school students at the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Center in East St. Louis, amidst all that hard work and silliness that occurs, I see something beautiful happening. I believe that’s a slice of heaven. God is in the middle of that situation and glorious things take place.

The visual image I would like to leave with you of what happens when we lead our lives as Peter Claver did, in total service to others, comes from a story of a group of nuns, the Sisters of Loretto, who moved into the New Mexico territory in 1852 to minister. I’m sure many of you have heard this story, about how they received assistance to build a church, but upon it being mostly completed, they found that no provision had been made to get from the main floor to the choir loft. In that time, people ascended to most choir lofts by using a ladder, and this seemed to be the only option because there was no space to construct an adequate staircase. This church building was (and continues to be) magnificent. The Sisters didn’t want to mar the beauty of their building with a crude-looking ladder. So the story goes that they prayed and appealed to St. Joseph (patron saint of carpenters) and out of nowhere, an old carpenter came and built for them a staircase with only a hammer and a saw. The result of his labors was a spiral staircase, made of non-native woods, held together by wooden nails and suspended from the floor to the choir loft with no outward means of support. This remains and is in use to this day, and is both an architectural wonder and a work of art. Since that time, historians have found that a French carpenter had recently moved to the community of the church, and it is strongly suspected that the staircase was sent directly from France (which would explain the presence of the non-native wood that it contains). Nevertheless, the Sisters received the answer to their prayers, and the staircase continues to stand. It is a monument to the grace that God pours out on His saints who attempt day in and day out by faith to live to His standard of love and service. Things that aren’t supposed to be able to happen happen. These saints’ inheritance is in heaven, but it is also in the midst of their actions – something beautiful emerges as the result of faithful actions borne of love.

As we commemorate God’s saints everywhere today, may we be inspired to step out in love and faith and experience the glory of God’s grace through our acts of service.