

All Saints

Once upon a time, there were two evil brothers. They were rich, and they used their money to keep their evil ways from the public eye. They even attended the same church, and appeared to be perfect Christians.

Then their pastor retired, and a new one arrived. Not only could the new pastor see right through the brothers' deception, but he also spoke well and true. During his pastorate, the congregation decided to build a new sanctuary, and a fund-raising campaign was started.

Not long afterward, one of the brothers met a sudden and untimely death. The day before the funeral, the remaining brother sought out the pastor and handed him a check for the amount needed to finish paying for the new building.

“I have only one condition,” he said. “At the funeral, you must say that my brother was a saint.” The pastor gave his word. And he deposited the check.

The next day, at the funeral, the pastor did not hold back. “He was an evil man,” the pastor declared. “He was unfaithful to his wife. And he abused his family.” After listing several more misdeeds of the deceased, the pastor concluded, “But compared to his brother, he was a saint.”

A saint. People have all kinds of different notions about saints. When you hear the word *saint*, what images come into your mind?

Do you visualize a member of the New Orleans professional football team?

Or maybe you picture the spouse of a temperamental relative or a crochety neighbor. Might that person be said to have the patience of a saint?

Many of us think of a saint as someone we’ve known who is no longer physically present with us, but rejoices on another shore and in a greater light.

For others, a saint is one who led a life so marked by mission, mysticism, or miracle that he or she has been canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. People like John of Patmos. Augustine of Hippo. Francis of Assisi. Teresa of Avila. To name

just a few. Traditionally, in artists' portrayals, auras of light encircle the heads of saints.

Saints have been called God's blessed ones. Maybe that's why today's gospel reading is appointed for the church to read on All Saints Sunday. Because Jesus' sermon starter for today is all about blessing. Two thousand years ago, his words had power to astonish and shock. And they still do!

We're not sure we heard him right. What's that you say, Jesus? *If you're poor, you're blessed? If you're hungry, you're blessed? If you're weeping, you're blessed? If you're hated and excluded and reviled and defamed, you're blessed?* All these sound a whole lot more like suffering than being blessed.

But the blessing that comes with suffering these things is the blessing of walking the path that Jesus walked. Of following him more nearly. Of striving each day to be more like him. He was a homeless preacher with few possessions. He knew what it is to be poor and to be hungry. For nourishment he depended on the hospitality of others. And he *wept*, this man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief. This One who was despised and rejected and mocked and beaten. This One who died praying for forgiveness for his executioners.

This is the very One who asks us to not wreak vengeance against our enemies, but rather to love them. To not strike back, but to offer the other cheek. To refrain from retaliation.

Because if our mantra is *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*, violence spirals. And escalates. And begets more and more violence. Until—as has been said—the end result is a society of the blind and the toothless. Products of a culture that glorifies conflict and urges: *Don't get mad. Get even!*

But, my sisters and brothers, this is not the message of Jesus Christ. His message is profoundly *countercultural*. Following where he leads requires walking away from the values of a society that is becoming increasingly violent.

And, following where Jesus leads requires walking away from the values of a society that embraces materialism; a culture that attempts to train us—from birth—to be avid consumers and to accumulate wealth and possessions. A culture that—when it acknowledges God at all—insists that God blesses not the impoverished, but the prosperous and the rich.

But God in Christ Jesus calls us to live simply and to share what we have with those who have little or nothing. Calls us to do to others as we would have them do to us.

For us who would follow Jesus, he's set the bar high. He's told us plainly that his way is narrow. How can we keep our feet on it? We don't think of ourselves as saints—do we? Aren't saints pious? Pure? Devout? Set apart? Aren't saints super-Christians who live in a higher realm? People who've been with Christ on the mountaintop, so to speak?

That's exactly where Jesus has been just before he speaks the words we hear today.

On a mountain. That's where he's called his first disciples, That's where he's chosen his inner circle. That's where they've been with him. If he had intended these words only for them—for the twelve alone—he would have spoken them on that mountain.

But he doesn't. Luke says that Jesus comes down from the mountain onto a plain. A level place. A place where a great crowd of people gathers to hear him. Today he's preaching to that crowd. To ordinary folk! Jesus' Sermon on the Plain is for ordinary people. Ordinary, like you and me. Isn't that how we think of ourselves?

But you know, for the author of Ephesians and for other New Testament writers—in other words, according to the authority of sacred Scripture—every baptized believer is a saint!

Every baptized believer is a saint. And saints are citizens of a kingdom: God's reign of radical reversals. In this kingdom, the last come in first. The least become greatest. The humble get exalted. Jesus Christ is in the process of turning this upside-down world right-side up. In a reign not yet fully accomplished, but already present.

Present here and now, in each of you who bring it near. The good news is that you don't have to be a saint all by yourself. You're part of a loving, caring, serving community that nourishes. You're part of a household that supports. You're part of a family that lifts up. You belong!

You're a believer. And because you are, you've been *marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit*. The Spirit is working in you. Restoring God's image in you. Transforming you into who you were created to be, who you were meant to be. Through the work of the Spirit in you, you're being made holy. You're being sanctified. And you know that the word *sanctified* is rooted in the same meaning as the word *saint*.

Saints believe. Saints walk by faith. Saints have shaped your faith and mine. Saints are the ones who have told the story, who have spread the gospel truth, who have made sure the blessing gets into the next generation. And saints are still doing these things! Look around this sanctuary. You'll see them.

Saints are ordinary people with extraordinary faith. And saints are witnesses. Many, down through twenty centuries, have witnessed to their faith with their lives. Their blood, the blood of martyrs, has been called the seed of the church. Saints have given up their lives. And saints have given *away* their lives in loving service.

And, beloved, when we gather this day around the table of grace, saints of the church invisible will be there with us. You'll know they're present. With the eyes of faith, you'll see them. You'll commune with them. You'll feast with them. You will receive and you will become the body of Christ with them.

Rejoice and celebrate together, *all* you saints, for surely your reward is great in heaven!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.