

All Saints Weekend '19: Saints Because of Whose (Not Who) We Are!

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

November 2-3, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

You may have seen the word “Samhain” (pronounced *SAH-wen*) recently. It falls on October 31<sup>st</sup>, and it’s a Celtic pagan holiday marking the transition from fall to winter, and acknowledging the shortening of daylight and the darkening of days. When the missionaries preached the Gospel to non-Christians, they often took pagan customs and christianized them. Since the 8<sup>th</sup> century the church has celebrated All Saints Day on November 1 –and we also observe All Saints Sunday first thing in November.

Here’s a definition of *saint* from a little book called *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of*

*Theological Terms*:

**Every Christian, including you, and many other persons whom you wouldn’t want to hang out with.**

So you think you already know what a saint is? Let’s guess: someone who is (a) so admirable that if you died you’d want them to take care of your puppy (b) but with whom you wouldn’t want to go to an R-rated movie. And you certainly wouldn’t want to be one! As a T-shirt we saw on a little kid said, “I tried being good, but I got bored.”

In this view, saints are people like Mother Teresa who are so selfless that we feel downright wicked by comparison.

But in the New Testament, the word *saint* never refers to a special class of super-duper Christians, rather it always refers to all Christians. For instance, the Letter to the Ephesians is addressed “to the saints in Ephesus.” Saints are not saintly because of what they do but because of what Christ has done for them. Christian saints are identified not by their own wisdom, good works, holiness, and wholeness but by the fact that they belong to Jesus.

And that means, of course, that you are qualified to be a saint, too. As is your worst nightmare of a neighbor. Groucho Marx may have said, “I don’t want to be a member of any club that will accept me as a member,” but Jesus said, in effect, “Only sinners need apply – and I will make you saints.”<sup>1</sup>

So on this All Saints Weekend we remember that we are holy, meaning we are set apart for God’s purposes, God’s work, God’s praise. We are not holy in and of ourselves; we are not holy because of who we are but because of Whose we are, having been claimed by Christ in Holy Baptism. And if describing ourselves as holy seems like a **stretch**, if it even seems like a **lie**, then we’ve got some growing and changing to do. Holiness isn’t a rare quality of the few; it’s the mark of the many who are members of the

Body of Christ. And holiness isn't a result of anything we've done – holiness is our identity and our calling because of what Christ has done.

There **are** people we look to, people whose title is “Saint” rather than Mr. or Mrs. or Reverend or Doctor, because their lives showed such shining Christ-like qualities. The Augsburg Confession, a foundational document of Lutheran theology, has this to say:

The saints are to be remembered so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith.

Used to be that the only “saints” acknowledged on our Lutheran calendar were the four evangelists, the 12 apostles, Mary, the mother of our Lord, St. Paul, and a few other New Testament folks. But over the years we've had a growing awareness of the need for role models in faith of **all** kinds: not just people who literally walked with Jesus but people who since have followed Jesus into many other walks of life and many other corners of the globe to enact as well as preach Good News and to explore avenues of knowledge and beauty other than theology, such as music, art and science. The music of Bach, the sculpture and paintings of Michelangelo, have deepened the faith of many over the centuries. And many saints **didn't** excel in intellect but **did** excel in love of God and neighbor and that's possible for each one of us regardless of our IQ, education, profession, zip code, financial stability or physical health.

I've been talking about our Holy Inspiration series co-sponsored with St. Denis & St. Mark's. Currently we're learning about Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic and reformer of her Carmelite order in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. (She was alive the same time as Martin Luther.) Teresa felt called to tighten up the way her Sisters lived their monastic life. They took their vows way too lightly; frequent entertaining of sailors in the convent parlor was one example of what curled her hair. As you can imagine, they weren't thrilled to be told their lifestyle had to change. Teresa, despite having quite a charismatic personality, was not always well-liked within her own order or by the higher-ups in the Church, who were suspicious of her mystical experiences. (The Inquisition was going on, so it was dangerous to be on the wrong side of the

powers-that-be. However, Teresa was courageous and fully convinced she was doing God's will.) One day she was traveling to one or another of the convents she had founded and was stuck in a torrential rainstorm and fell in a mud puddle. She knocked on a bishop's door to get in out of the rain and was refused entrance. Bedraggled and frustrated, she asked God, "Why???" And she felt God respond, "Because you are My friend," to which she replied, "If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder You have so few!!" She's a great example of the humanity of the Saints with a capital S.

Today, November 3, we remember Martin de Porres, who also lived in the same century as Martin Luther and Teresa of Avila. Martin was born in Lima, Peru, the illegitimate son of a Spanish knight and a freed Panamanian slave, either a black or an Indian woman. Martin's father abandoned Martin and his mother. She raised him, and taught him the healing qualities of herbs. He was interested in medicine and apprenticed himself to a barber/surgeon. At the age of 15 he joined a Dominican monastery in Lima, as a lay brother. His special ministry was caring for the sick and injured who came to the monastery for treatment, including the poor. He referred to himself as a "mulatto dog," but saw others only as children of God. He never turned anyone away and was known as "Martin the Charitable". He apparently said:

Compassion, my dear brothers, is preferable to cleanliness. Reflect that with a little soap I can easily clean my bed covers, but even with a torrent of tears I would never wash from my soul the stain that my harshness toward the unfortunate would create.<sup>2</sup>

Martin founded a hospital, an orphanage, and a clinic for animals. He was always adopting abandoned cats and dogs ('not sure how that went over with his Brothers) and was known for not even evicting the rats who ate the Brothers' grain or the mice who nibbled on their beautiful vestments. He is the patron saint of racial harmony and also of animal shelters.

These folks' **big** commitment to God challenges our little, sometimes half-hearted efforts. Their generosity convicts us of our stinginess. Their passion for God shames our lukewarmness. Their awareness of others' pain highlights our myopic tendency to see only our own. Their ability to recognize, "This is all Yours!" challenges our temptation to say, "This is all mine!" And yet God isn't finished with us

yet. As we look at the names of church friends who have passed away this last year, we remember their personalities, including their Christ-like qualities:

- Fran Siemers' gift of generosity
- Eleanor Steiner's gift of mercy
- Eleanor Wuchter's gift of gentle strength
- Tina Kelly's gift of faith in the most trying circumstances
- Shawn O'Brien's gift of the love of children

The saints with a capital "S" we read about in books and the saints with a small "s" whom we've been blessed to know and love weren't any more perfect than we are. But they are holy and so are we: saints and sinners at the same time.

We are all a work in progress, God-willing. Luther wrote:

This life therefore is not righteousness but growth in righteousness;  
Not health, but healing;  
Not being, but becoming;  
Not rest, but exercise.

We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. We have not arrived but we are on the way. All does not yet gleam in glory, but all is being purified.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Rolf A. Jacobson, Editor, *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffey Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2008), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *More Days for Praise: Festivals and Commemorations in Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), p. 259.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham