

Gary L. Bagley
Hilton Presbyterian Church
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These People—Our Relatives
Revelation 7:9-17

Today is the day after All Saints' Day. Halloween, the eve of this holy day, occurred on Friday. All Saints' Day is a day the Church-at-large sets aside to remember the saints—all who have gone before them. Saints are just ordinary people. But, what makes them different is their extraordinary love of God.

After this I 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...

Sitting in our back yard is a statue of St. Francis...sitting, with a bird on his shoulder and a wolf at his side. He is known for his love of animals and nature with legends that follow him of talking to the birds and taming a wolf. Founder of the Order of Friars Minor, known as the Franciscans, we often sing a hymn in our church whose text is attributed this saint: "All Creatures of Our God and King."

From another of the saints came our stewardship theme for this year—St. Ignatius of Loyola. *Teach us good Lord to serve thee as thou deservest, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to labor and not to seek for rest, to work and not to seek for any reward save that of knowing that we do thy will.*

Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus, whose members are called Jesuits. He is best known for the Spiritual Exercises, or a guide to the devotional life. Ignatius is probably now best known to us now for his prayer.

There are many other saints—Saint Joan of Arc, Saint Patrick, Saint Christopher. Hilton Presbyterian Church has had its share of saints—ordinary men and women whose love for God was extraordinary. You know some of them. I've heard you call their names in conversation...those who served, those who worked, those who gave and never counted the cost.

Have you ever heard the legend of the "Baker's Dozen"—a Saint Nicholas

Tale?¹

In the Dutch colonial town later known as Albany, New York, there lived a baker, Van Amsterdam, who was as honest as he could be. Each morning, he checked and balanced his scales, and he took great care to give his customers exactly what they paid for—not more and not less.

Van Amsterdam's shop was always busy, because people trusted him, and because he was a good baker as well. And never was the shop busier than in the days before December 6, when the Dutch celebrate Saint Nicholas Day.

At that time of year, people flocked to the baker's shop to buy his fine Saint Nicholas cookies. Made of gingerbread, iced in red and white, they looked just like Saint Nicholas as the Dutch know him—tall and thin, with a high, red bishop's cap, and a long, red bishop's cloak.

One Saint Nicholas Day morning, the baker was just ready for business, when the door of his shop flew open. In walked an old woman, wrapped in a long black shawl.

"I have come for a dozen of your Saint Nicholas cookies."

Taking a tray, Van Amsterdam counted out twelve cookies. He started to wrap them, but the woman reached out and stopped him.

"I asked for a dozen. You have given me only twelve."

"Madam," said the baker, "everyone knows that a dozen is twelve."

"But I say a dozen is thirteen," said the woman. "Give me one more."

Van Amsterdam was not a man to bear foolishness. "Madam, my customers get exactly what they pay for—not more and not less."

"Then you may keep the cookies," the woman said. She turned to go, but stopped at the door.

"Van Amsterdam! However honest you may be, your heart is small and your fist is tight. Fall again, mount again, learn how to count again!"

Then she was gone.

From that day, everything went wrong in Van Amsterdam's bakery. His bread rose too high or not at all. His pies were sour or too sweet. His cakes crumbled or were chewy. His cookies were burnt or doughy.

His customers soon noticed the difference. Before long, most of them were going to other bakers.

"That old woman has bewitched me," said the baker to himself. "Is this how my honesty is rewarded?"

A year passed. The baker grew poorer and poorer. Since he sold little, he baked little, and his shelves were nearly bare. His last few customers slipped away.

Finally, on the day before Saint Nicholas Day, not one customer came to Van Amsterdam's shop. At day's end, the baker sat alone, staring at his unsold Saint Nicholas cookies.

"I wish Saint Nicholas could help me now," he said. Then he closed his shop and went sadly to bed.

That night, the baker had a dream. He was a boy again, one in a crowd of happy children. And there in the midst of them was Saint Nicholas himself.

The bishop's white horse stood beside him, its baskets filled with gifts.

¹ Aaron Shepard, *The Baker's Dozen: A Saint Nicholas Tale* (Atheneum, New York: 1995).

Nicholas pulled out one gift after another, and handed them to the children. But Van Amsterdam noticed something strange. No matter how many presents Nicholas passed out, there were always more to give. In fact, the more he took from the baskets, the more they seemed to hold.

Then Nicholas handed a gift to Van Amsterdam. It was one of the baker's own Saint Nicholas cookies! Van Amsterdam looked up to thank him, but it was no longer Saint Nicholas standing there. Smiling down at him was the old woman with the long black shawl.

Van Amsterdam awoke with a start. Moonlight shone through the half-closed shutters as he lay there, thinking.

"I always give my customers exactly what they pay for," he said to himself, "not more and not less. But why not give more?"

The next morning, Saint Nicholas Day, the baker rose early. He mixed his gingerbread dough and rolled it out. He cut the shapes and baked them. He iced them in red and white to look just like Saint Nicholas. And the cookies were as fine as any he had made.

Van Amsterdam had just finished, when the door flew open. In walked the old woman with the long black shawl.

"I have come for a dozen of your Saint Nicholas cookies."

In great excitement, Van Amsterdam counted out twelve cookies—and one more.

"In this shop," he said, "from now on, a dozen is thirteen."

"You have learned to count well," said the woman. "You will surely be rewarded."

She paid for the cookies and started out. But as the door swung shut, the baker's eyes seemed to play a trick on him. He thought he glimpsed the tail end of a long red cloak.

As the old woman foretold, Van Amsterdam was rewarded. When people heard he counted thirteen as a dozen, he had more customers than ever.

In fact, Van Amsterdam grew so wealthy that the other bakers in town began doing the same. From there, the practice spread to other towns, and at last through all the American colonies. And this, they say, is how thirteen became the "baker's dozen"—a custom common for over a century, and alive in some places to this day.

From an "Institutional Advancement Dean," I just recently heard about a college in one of the mid-western states that was in danger of closing its doors because of financial problems. The founder of one of the large GPS device making companies confided in a friend that he didn't need all of the money he had made. "I need to give it to some worthy cause," he said. At that, his friend told him about this particular college's distress. A quiet major gift saved the school. If I told you, you would quickly recognize the donor's company and the school. Another saint, "giving and not counting the cost."

In the book, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*², Andrea Hensley tells of a group of counselors from a nearby camp enjoying an afternoon off at a park in Portland. It was lunchtime and they decided to split up, buy their lunch, and meet back in the park for a picnic. Robby and her friend headed for a hot dog stand. The vendor put together the perfect hot dog, just the way Robby wanted it. When she took out her money to pay him, the man surprised her by saying, "Never mind paying me; this will be my freebie of the day."

Robbie thanked the hot dog vendor and joined their friends in the park. As they enjoyed their food, the girls were distracted by a man sitting alone nearby. It was obvious that he hadn't showered for days. Another homeless person, they thought, like all the others you see in cities.

When the girls finished, Robby and her friend went to the garbage can to throw away their lunch bag when they heard a strong voice ask, "There isn't any food in the bag, is there?" It was the man who had been watching them.

"No, we ate it all," they said.

"Oh" was his only response.

As her friend watched, Robby said, "I'll be right back." With that, she crossed the street and went back to the hot dog vendor. She bought a hot dog, crossed the street again, and went back to the trashcan, giving the hungry man the food.

When Robby rejoined her group, she simply said, "I was just passing on the kindness that someone gave to me." That day her friends learned how generosity can go farther than the person you give to. By giving, you teach others how to give also.

Our world is full of saints in the form of hot dog vendors, camp counselors, and major donors...all "giving without considering the cost."

As we were sharing the newspaper three Sunday afternoons ago, Jennifer interrupted me to read a short article. An older couple had died in an automobile accident in Alto, Michigan. Willis Hatch farmed beef cattle and Arlene taught seventh grade. They never had children of their own but saw their neighbors as family members. After their death, their neighbors discovered how deep their

² Jack Canfield, Mark Victor, Hansen, and Kimberly Kirberger, *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (Health Commincations, Inc., Deerfield Beach, FL: 1997) 136-138.

feelings went.

The Hatches lived a simple life and spent little money on fancy things. At their unexpected death, their church and more than 70 neighbors received notices that they had inherited money from Arlene and Willis. The couple that lived so frugally, had accumulated nearly \$3 million and left most of it to their neighbors. The gifts range in value from \$5,000 to over \$100,000. Their gifts would send neighborhood kids to colleges, assist some who had very little, and contribute to their Methodist Church's building program.³

Saints aren't just those who lived hundreds of years ago who wrote beautiful prayers, tamed wolves and created spiritual orders of service. They are also the Mother Teresas, the Arlene and Willis Hatches, the hot dog vendors, the Lynn Finders, and countless others who for the most part are ordinary people with an extraordinary love of God and others. Without exception, they are those who "give without counting the cost." And this church has had plenty of them.

As we gather on this All Saint's Day weekend and reflect on "great multitude...of every nation and tribe and peoples and languages," just remember that we are not alone. All of these saints are with us. They are present, cheering us on to do our best, encouraging us to love wastefully, and challenging us to "give without counting the cost."

Prayer

³ Barbara Pinto, The Associated Press, "When the Hatches Died, Their Friends Learned How Much They Valued Them," October 12, 2008.

All Saints' Day Lectionary:

Revelation 7:9-17

9After this I 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, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" 14I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. 16They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 17for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."