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Newport News, Virginia
November 1, 2009

For All the Saints
John 11:32-44; Psalm 24

Today is All Saints Day. For the Western World, it is always on November the first—a Holy or hallowed day. And the eve of this holy day, Halloween, always falls on October 31. It is fitting on this day that the gospel reading, presented in tableaux form by our youth, is the story of the raising of Lazarus by Jesus. The powerful statement made by this story in John’s gospel is that God refuses to allow death the final word. Christ, who declares himself to be “the resurrection and the life” freely enters into the suffering of the world that God loves.

Part of what makes All Saints Day this year a bit closer to home is that we commemorated the lives of three friends from this community of faith within the last four days—Jim Day, Harriet and James MacNeil. During those services we sang the words of Saint Francis. We sang Martin Luther’s hymn. And, today our opening congregational hymn was written by William Walsham How and titled, “For All the Saints.”

A friend of mine said, that All Saints’ Day is like a family reunion day for the church.¹¹ Think of some of the more notable Saints and you quickly call to mind the likes of Saint Francis, Joan of Arc, Saint Christopher, or Saint Augustine. **Saint Francis** is the one known for loving animals, birds, and who felt one with nature...“brother sun, sister moon,” he would say.

It was **Saint Joan of Arc**, who led men twice her size into battle. She preferred armor to petticoats and puzzled everyone by dressing like a man, but the voices of her critics were nothing compared to the voice of God in her head.

Saint Christopher is the one depicted hiking through a swollen river with his tunic hitched up around his knees, his right hand on his staff and his left around the feet of the child he is carrying on his back.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 208-212.

Other less familiar saints include **Maximilian**...the first conscientious objector, who was drafted by the Roman army but refused to serve. His only loyalty, he said, was to the army of God. This was a great shame and sadness to his father, a veteran soldier, who knew that his son's decision meant death. At his beheading, Maximilian noticed the shabby clothing of his executioner and, calling to his father in the crowd, asked that his own new clothes be taken off and given to the man.

Another similar story is told about **Saint James the Greater**, brother of Saint John, who was so full of grace on his way to his death that the guard assigned to him fell on his knees and confessed faith in his prisoner's God. James raised him up by the hand, kissed him on the cheek, and said, "Peace be with you." Then both men were executed together, but their last tender exchange lives on in the exchange of the peace that we observed just earlier this day: "The peace of Christ be with you."

When you start getting to know these saints, one of the first things you notice is that they were not...saints. Legend has it that **Saint Francis** rolled naked in the snow to defend himself against his lusty thoughts.

Saint Christopher was on his way to work for the devil when a mysterious hermit recruited him for God instead.

Saint Mary of Egypt was a prostitute for seventeen years before she became a desert mother for the next fifty and **Saint Bernard** was one of the organizers of the second crusade, which collapsed into an orgy of pillage and looting.

You and I need to be aware that saints are not distinguished by their goodness. They are distinguished by their extravagant love of God, which shines brighter than anything else about them. Saints really are ordinary men and women whose love of God has led them to do extraordinary things, which means none of us can shrug our shoulders and say sainthood is beyond our reach.

I have talked a lot about the dead, but assuming that you must be dead to be a saint is, however, a mistake. Unfortunately, that is one of the requirements for canonization in the Roman Catholic Church, but the truth is that there are living saints all over the place..

An unsuspected saint I read about in a “Time Magazine” article about eight years ago was from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Her name is **Osceola McCarty**. She didn’t look like a saint. She was just a laundress—an old African-American woman who had never married, dropping out of school when she was in sixth grade to begin a lifetime of washing clothes. That was the year her aunt came out of the hospital, unable to walk, and moved in with her family. Twelve-year-old McCarty left school to care for her and to help her mother and grandmother with the backyard laundry business. By the time her aunt recovered a year later, Osceola thought she was too far behind to return to school. “I was too big,” she says, “so I kept on working.”

For the next seventy-five years that is what she did, scrubbing the dark clothes on a washboard and boiling the whites in a big black pot in her backyard before hanging them all out on the line to dry and then ironing them. Her day started when the sun came up and stopped when it went down. It was not until she was eighty-seven years old that anyone knew fully who she was.

That was the year she gave \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships, preferably poor black students who otherwise would not be able to go on to college. Her banker helped her set up an irrevocable trust. Using dimes to denote percentages and pieces of paper to the persons or entities she wanted to leave her money to, she used the first dime (10%) for her church. She used three dimes (10% each) for three cousins. The remaining six dimes (60%) were placed on the piece of paper that said, “University of Southern Mississippi.” She never owned an automobile, pushing a cart over a mile each way to her grocery store. McCarty said the one question she was asked more than any other was why she did not spend the money on herself. “*I am* spending it on myself,” she answered, smiling the slyest of smiles.

Along with Bob Dole, Colin Powell, Hank Aaron, and many others, she is a recipient of the U.S. Presidential Citizens Medal.

Jennifer reads my sermons on Friday or Saturday before last minute changes are made. When she woke this morning she said she had a dream about my sermon, but it was titled, “Reluctant Heroes.” Probably a far better title, because saints and heroes never desire to be such. They are ordinary people who live with convictions that come from the heart.

On All Saints' Day, we make the very bold claim that all these people are our relatives. We have the same blood running in our veins —Christ's blood — and the same light we see shining in them shines in us too. The last child that was baptized from our font was Paige Elizabeth Loeffler, the daughter of Lauren and Jason who are now living in Pensacola. As she was baptized, all of us reaffirmed our baptismal vows. As the quote on the front of our bulletin today reminds us, "Once you are baptized, you belong to God and all that remains to be seen is what you will do about it...."

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 Jim Days, the Harriet and James MacNeils, 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 and reflect on the "great multitude of people...from every nation and tribe and of all 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

John 11:32-44

11:32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

11:33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.

11:34 He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."

11:35 Jesus began to weep

11:36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

11:37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

11:38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

11:39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."

11:40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

11:41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.

11:42 I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."

11:43 When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus come out!"

11:44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him and let him go."

Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?

Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

Who is the King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by another Way* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), pp. 208-212.