

“Saints: Not Super Persons”

Date: Nov. 6, 2011

Occasion: All Saints Day

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: sainthood, sanctification, baptism

Text: 1 John 3:1-3

Have you heard the joke about the Sunday School teacher who asked her class if they wanted to go to Heaven? Well, let me tell it to you. One Sunday the teacher smiled and said to her young students, “All right class, all those who want to go to heaven, raise your hands.”

Everybody in the class put their hands up in the air except for one boy. “Bobby, don’t you want to go to heaven?” asked the teacher.

“Well sure,” said Bobby. “But I can’t. My Mom wants me to come straight home after Sunday School.”

Today is All Saints Day. And many of us approach All Saints Day much like little Bobby - with a certain degree of caution, and misunderstanding. The teacher didn’t mean that her class was going to Heaven right then and there. The boy misunderstood. Honestly, some of us have some misunderstandings about sainthood, too.

While it is true that there have been certain Christians who have lived exceptional lives of virtue, and we do well to look up to them, there is also a New Testament concept which says that all believing Christians are saints.

In many of his letters to the early churches, Paul would often refer to the Christians living in those cities as saints. For example, look at the greeting to his letters to Rome, to Corinth, to Thessalonica, to Ephesus. Not all of the Christians living in those cities were such super-persons as we often associate with the word saint.

Rather, what Paul meant when he used the word saint, and the way in which I

am using it this morning is this - the saints are those people who belong to God. Those people who have dedicated their lives to serving the Lord Jesus Christ. It refers to anyone who has been baptized. In baptism we acknowledge that we have died to sin, and we have been born anew in Jesus. We give our lives to following and serving Him.

Now, you and I both know that not everyone who has been baptized is living a virtuous life. Not everyone who gets baptized takes seriously the call to live like Jesus.

In fact, you might be one of those persons who shuns the word saint. Who wants to be a saint? It sounds like a boring life where you never get to have any fun.

For many people it does have a negative connotation, of being holier than thou, of somehow not being like everyone else. I'd like to challenge us this morning, to think a bit more seriously about what it means to be set apart by grace, for a life of following Jesus. And I'd like to use as my outline the three verses I just read from First John.

So if you would, open your Bibles to the New Testament (p. 1900). Let's find the book of 1 John, chapter 3. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Listen to me, people of God. The beginning of sainthood starts with God. Not us, but with God. Saints are those people who have discovered the life-changing message of God's love. God first loved us!

A man was once asked when he was saved. And he answered without blinking an eye. "I was saved 2,000 years ago." Asked to explain himself he said, "When Jesus died on the cross 2,000 years ago, he died for me and for my sins. That's when I was saved. But it took me until I was in my mid-twenties before I

discovered it. But God loved me before I even heard the good news.”

In a way, saints are simply those people who have had their eyes opened. They are the ones who have been awakened from a deep sleep, and when they awoke discovered that there is a God, a God who loves us, and who calls us into a special relationship with Him.

God had tried many, many different ways to show the world His love. But the world simply did not recognize God’s love. And so, God decided to become like us. Born into the world as a human baby, growing up in a family, working as a carpenter, living among us, as one of us, God showed us divine love through Jesus.

But the world knew him not. At least not everyone. Some people recognized that God was truly living among his people, in the flesh. But not everyone could see. However, for those who could see, those who recognized the divine in their midst, their lives were changed forever. They left everything to follow Him. They were different for having recognized that Love was living among them.

My friends, as we live into the 21st century, we are living in an age when many people do not recognize God at all. To be a Christian in this time in which we live means that we will be different from those around us. Simply to say that you believe in God, and that you put your whole life in God’s care is to make a radical statement.

A radical statement that many people cannot understand. To be a saint, you do not have to be a super-person. You merely have to believe in God, and in God’s beloved Son, Jesus, the anointed One. Trust me. Trust me, we who believe are becoming a minority.

Saints are not perfect people who have no faults. Saints are imperfect people who have discovered that they are loved by a perfect God, who loves them in spite

of their imperfection. Believe it or not, you and I, we are the saints.

Open your Bibles again to verse 2: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Saints are God’s children, right now! We do not have to be perfect in order to be God’s children. God loves us and accepts us, and calls us His own, right now. Not when we get it all together. Not when we have given up all of our bad habits. Not when we become some kind of super person. But right now, even with all of our faults - God loves us and calls us His saints.

OK, Pastor Bob, I can accept that. But what about that line in verse 2 that says, “When he appears we shall be like him?” I don’t always feel very godly. And my actions are not always in line with the way I know God wants me to live. I know that I still sin, and Jesus never sinned. I will appear like Him? What does that mean?

Let’s read on in verse three for a clue. “Everyone who has this hope in him, purifies himself, just as he is pure.” Now we begin to see where Paul is going with this argument. We’re not super person who never make mistakes, who never sin. But we are the ones who are committed to following Jesus, and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives to change us. We are open to being transformed.

John Wesley used the term sanctification. We are not perfect now, but we are going on to perfection, allowing God to make suggestions as we move through life, as to how we can become more gracious, more loving, more just, more giving. We begin to notice how our actions hurt others, and we make changes.

The saints are not super persons who never sin again in their lives. But they are those who give their life to Jesus, asking God to transform them, so that they

can help to make the world a better place. We become disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world. But before we go transforming out there, we allow God to transform what's in here - in our hearts.

To be a saint is merely to be a child of God, who knows the love of God, and who tries to put that love into practice in their daily lives. As a mother, as a business person, as a lawyer, a teacher, as a student, a cook or a car mechanic. Receiving the love of Jesus Christ, and putting it into practice. That is a saintly life. Amen?

Pastoral Prayer - All Saints Day 2011

O God, great beyond our imagining, wise beyond our understanding, powerful beyond our measuring, and loving beyond our deserving: Praise be to You. All around us Creation speaks to us of your loving and creative power. Over and over again we see your healing, redemptive power at work: bringing health to the sick, new possibilities to the hopeless, and forgiveness to those who have sinned. Almighty God, praise and glory and majesty to you. Receive the praise of your people.

Out of your manifold grace, minister to each of us according to our need. Comfort the grieving in the sorrow. Deliver the tempted from their trials. Refresh the weary in their labors. Encourage the generous in their giving. Celebrate with those who rejoice and give thanks. Save the lost from their sinning. And be with each of us in all things, o God. You are the One who guides us and sustains us. Praise be to you.

This All Saints Day, o God, we remember those who were close to us who have died. Comfort us in our grief. Bless the memory of our loved ones, as we give you thanks for everything in their lives that allowed us to see your love and grace more clearly. We thank you for their faith, we thank you for the hope of resurrection, and most of all for your love shown through your Son, Jesus the Christ.

We thank you God for our church, for our church family, and for our mission

and ministry to Jesus. We ask o Lord your blessing upon our efforts to share the love of Jesus, in our homes, in our community, in our country and around the world. We pray for churches everywhere who are striving to live the Gospel. We pray for missionaries who take the love of Jesus into the dark corners of the world. We pray for Christians who are being persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith. Lord, on this All Saints Day, we remember our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. Bless them.

Heavenly Father, we pray for those who are sick, afflicted or convalescing. We ask an extra portion of your grace and love. Grant them courage to endure, and given them a never failing well-spring of hope. Take away their anxious thoughts and replaces those thoughts with trust and confidence in you. In you alone, o God, we make our home and find our lives renewed.

In the knowledge that you hear us and answer us, we rejoice, loving God. And all of these things we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who taught us to say these words when we pray, "Our Father....."