

Sermon All Saints Year C November 7, 2010

Luke gives us some pretty strong words today. Unlike Matthew that sets the sermon on the mount as a series of blessings: *“blessed are the peacemakers”* or *“blessed are the meek”* – Luke adds, *“Woe to you who are full now”* *“Woe to you who are laughing now”* *Love your enemies, bless those who curse you.”*

Some of these words are pretty tough to hear, especially in this troubled world in which many wish us harm. *“Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. When someone strikes you turn the other cheek.”* How are we to reconcile this command of Jesus in the face of terrorist threats that are real? Where do we look for answers? I think it’s fortuitous that the Church gives us this reading as we celebrate All Saints.

All Saints Day and the concept of SAINT somehow feels ‘out there.’ It’s an idea that seems removed from our day-to-day experience. For most of us SAINTS are out there—something beyond ourselves—beyond our experience.

I turned to—the Webster’s Dictionary to get the definition of a saint. It says: Saint: One officially recognized especially through canonization as preeminent for holiness: one eminent in piety or virtue. The root of the word saint comes from the Latin word Sanctus which means HOLY.

To be a saint. To be one eminent in piety and virtue. To be recognized as one preeminent in holiness. ME? I don’t think so. And yet, Luke’s central call in the beatitudes is a call to holiness...a call to sainthood. The Church points them out to us as those who GOT IT RIGHT.

We have this fun book on the lives of the saints at home called *Saints Preserve Us*. It gives some pretty dramatic descriptions of these largely colorful characters. One of my favorites is the description of Christiana the Astonishing...so I thought I'd share a little bit about her.

Christina, was born in Belgium in 1150, and was orphaned soon after. Around the age of 21 she suffered a massive seizure, which resulted in a condition so severe that everyone assumed she was dead. During her funeral service, she awoke and it is said she levitated over the crowd. A priest in attendance ordered her to descend, and she did so upon the altar of the church and proclaimed to all that she had witnessed Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

After that incident, Christina exhibited more strange behavior. It is thought today that she suffered from an extreme form of epilepsy. She claimed that she could 'smell sin' on people, especially men, and in order to escape the smell she would climb trees and rooftops and one time even hid inside an oven. Other times she would levitate to extreme heights. Christina chose to live in poverty, and exhibited it in ways that were extreme even by 13th century standards. She slept on rocks, wore rags, and begged for her food. She would roll in fire or handle it without harm, stand in freezing water for hours, or spend long periods in tombs. The people of the day were divided in their opinions: Some said she was a holy woman, touched of God, - Others believed she was completely insane. She passed away at the age of 74 due to natural causes. Christina is considered to be patroness of insanity; lunatics; madness; mental disorders; mental handicaps; mental health caregivers; mental

health professionals; mental illness; mentally ill people; psychiatrists; and therapists...none of which seems surprising given her behavior.

Christina, like many of the stories of the saints are often strange. Most had quirks and vices and yet they are saints. Why is it? What is it that they had? Did they have anything in common with each other? Do they have anything in common with us? (T)

During 9-11 we heard lots of stories about heroes...men and women in uniform running up the stairs of the Trade Center while people were running down the stairs. Rarely a day goes by when we don't hear about someone doing something extraordinary in the news.

Most of us will never be called upon to run up a flight of stairs in a fire. And certainly most of us won't fly out of our coffins and perch ourselves in the rafters...at least I hope not.

But all of us are called to sainthood in the extraordinary moments in the ordinary choices we make day after day...All of us are called to GET IT RIGHT. This my friends is where we find the message of sainthood. It is a call to pause, to reflect, and to act within the context of a life of faith...faith in God, faith in ourselves...faith in our fellow human beings...a call to GET IT RIGHT.

Several years ago, I spent a day with Dr. Viktor Frankl. It was in the context of a large convention that I was organizing and he came to speak to us. He shared a story about him and his father in Auschwitz. His father was near death and in great pain. Viktor was able to smuggle a couple of vials of morphine into the camp when he and his family were rounded up. He was able to administer the morphine to his father, which brought the father

instant comfort from his pain. What is extraordinary is the feeling that Viktor described in giving his father the morphine. Of all the moments in his life, this chance to give this morphine to his father brought him, a sense of ecstatic joy that was unparalleled in his life. In the midst of this concentration camp, surrounded by death, Viktor Frankl experienced rapture and a joy that transcended his physical reality.

While again, we are not Viktor Frankl, or Christina the Astonishing, or the firefighters at the World Trade Center...we have, in our everyday lives the opportunity to be saints. What Jesus is calling us to in this passage from Luke is the same thing in **our daily lives** that Frankl and the rest had...We have the ability to transcend the finitude of ourselves. In our radical freedom we can **choose** to be a saint. It's not fate handed to us...It's not something out there. It is something very much inside us...It is the fundamental human radical ability to choose to transcend oneself and ones own situation. We are saints, because we have been fashioned in such a way that we can always choose to GET IT RIGHT.

It is this radical choice in our human nature. We can either choose to be a Mother Teresa or we can choose to be a Hitler. We have the freedom to choose radical good or radical evil.

So today, we celebrate those who have chosen radically---for the Good. Those who in choosing were able to transcend themselves and their limitations—to choose to *“Turn the other cheek.” “To love an enemy and bless one who curses.”* We point to them as those who GOT IT RIGHT. We **can** be saints; we are called to be saints. It is in our very nature to GET IT RIGHT.

We all know people who we call saints. Maybe it's a sainted mother, or father, or teacher or a favorite aunt. Maybe it's a friend or a neighbor, or someone in this room. We all know them. And how do we know them? We know them because they have this quality, in the ordinariness of the day-to-day they have the ability to transcend the vicissitudes of life, they choose—although not consciously—to be saints. They have their vices and quirks. Yet, they choose to love an enemy, or turn the other cheek. They choose to share what they have with the poor and the sick. They choose to weep with those who weep. They choose to GET IT RIGHT.

But most of all through their example, they call us to transcend ourselves. They invite us to see beyond the narrow horizons of our lives. They inspire us to weep with those who weep.

May we remember this day the saints, the heroes, those who inspire and challenge us to transcend ourselves and to become saints in our community, in our lives and in our work, in our nation and world. And in doing so, may one day, someone say of us *"they're a saint."* THEY GOT IT RIGHT. Amen.