

Oct. 30, 2011

“Saints”

Matt. 23:1-12

Clarence Jordan was a farmer and self-taught Bible student, who established in the 1950s and 1960s—even before the Civil Rights Era—a community based on the book of Acts. In that community, blacks and whites worked side by side in the deep South, in Georgia, and shared all that they had. Jordan was vilified by white supremacists down there for his courage in living the Gospel. But there is a story about him that not only did he have to suffer for his convictions, but his children did, too.

One day his daughter Jan came home from school in tears. “What’s wrong?” he asked her. “Oh, Dad,” she replied, “a lot of the kids are mean, but there’s this one boy named Bob Speck. Every time Bob sees me coming down the hallway, he comes up and knocks me down. He throws my books down the hallway. He says the ugliest words to me.” Jordan said, “Jan, you’ve got long fingernails. Why don’t you scratch his eyes out?” She answered, “Well, I thought about that, but I heard you say in your sermon that Jesus said we’re supposed to love our enemy, so I thought I shouldn’t scratch his eyes out.” So Jordan said, “Well, tomorrow, I’m going to the school, and I’m going to ask Jesus to excuse me from being a Christian for about 15 minutes while I beat the daylights out of Bob Speck.” And his daughter said, “Daddy you can’t do that.” And he said, “Why can’t I?” And she said, “You can’t be excused from being a Christian for 15 minutes.”

Today is the Sunday closest to what we call All Saints Day, which used to be called “All Hallows Day.” The day before All Hallows Day used to be called All Hallows Evening, which became shortened to Halloween, when all the kids would dress up in ghoulish outfits to scare the daylights out of the demons and devils, so that All Hallows Day might be truly reserved for the saints. So...what is a saint? I’m glad you asked!

The reading from Matthew gives us an idea of what a saint is not. A saint is not a minister who dresses up in a black robe with all the trappings, stole and cross, and a proper holy name, like “reverend.” Know anyone like that? It’s *not* what a saint is. Jesus makes it very clear. A saint is not one who stands on ceremonies or calls attention to his own honors and glories. Nor is a saint one who says one thing but does another. Jesus tells his listeners to do what the religious leaders *tell* them to do...but not as they do. My father used to say to me, “Don’t do as I do...do as I say do.” In many ways my father was a saint. But not in that way. I know he was trying to be the best kind of father he could be, given the material he had to work with.

So *what is a saint?* A saint is someone, I guess, who can never be excused—not even for 15 minutes—from being a follower of Jesus, even in the face of cruel hate. You can't be excused from being a Christian for even a minute!

*What is a saint?* Jesus says here that the greatest among you will be your servant. Jesus was forever talking about greatness. But greatness for him wasn't measured by how many stars you earned in your crown by sacrifices you made in life. It is measured by whether you live to serve others. Frank Thomas of the huge Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis, TN, prefers to call himself the *senior servant* instead of senior pastor. I like that!

Thomas told us a few years ago at the Regional Assembly that we're a nation of people who prefer to *look* right rather than *do* right. God is already clapping for you, he told us. Do you need anyone else to clap for you? A saint sees the way God sees her, and it is enough. Greatness is measured by who we are in God's eyes...not who we are in the eyes of others. Oscar Wilde once said the difference between a saint and a sinner is that every sinner has a past and every saint has a future!

*What is a saint?* Bob Carlyle (of "Butterfly Kisses" fame) recorded another song, this about a man whose life had taken some hard turns. He would walk by a monastery each day...wondering how nice it must be to live in such a sheltered place. One day, he ran into one of the monks, who told him that life was hard there, too. "*The saints,*" said the monk, "*are just the sinners who fall down and get up.*" And in the background of Carlyle's song, a children's choir breaks in with the refrain: "*We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up. We fall down; we get up. And the saints are just the sinners who fall down and get up.*"

*What is a saint?* Perhaps it's the kind of person that simply asks a different set of questions. Richard Foster thinks about the desert fathers, who lived lives of austerity some 1,500 years ago. "Our world asks, '*How can I get more?*'" he said. "The desert fathers asked, '*What can I do without?*' Our world asks, '*How can I find myself?*' The desert fathers asked, '*How can I lose myself.*' Our world asks, '*How can I win friends and influence people.*' The desert fathers asked, "*How can I love God?*"

When I think of saints, I think of Kenny Hicks, a long-time member of this church. Many of you didn't know him. But Kenny was genuine, humble, always accepting of others, always welcoming of newcomers. He was a giving man, a man of simple faith. Always a smile on his face. Nothing fancy. He was simply a servant. I think of Elaine Aber, Bill's mother, who had a deep conscience and a love for justice. She became a true example for me. Saints are people we watch, and we want to be like them. If you are a saint, someone is watching you! No pressure.

William Barclay once said a saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God. Some of you are saints, not because you're good or kind or smart or wise.

But you've measured yourself against what God asks and found yourself falling short. You give of yourself anyway, trusting that your small, insignificant gift will be received. You don't worry about heaven or hell any longer. You're just alive, and grateful for every day you breathe. You're not holy because of what you do...but you bring holiness to the task. You bring every ounce of your faith into every second of your life, trusting that in Jesus Christ it is always enough. One never *is* a saint. One is always *becoming* one.

Saints are invited to this table. But sinners are welcome, too. Here we share our greatness by holding the trays for one another, serving one another, as Jesus served us. Here is bread for sinners, served by sinners who fall down every day...but today we get up again. Here is the blood of Christ, spilled out for your neighbor...shed for you. By it, we share as a community the call to become saints.