

Ecclesiastics 2:1-11
Psalm 149:1-5
Ephesians 1:11-23
LUKE 6:20-36

Sermon – November 4, 2007

The festival of All the Saints is about many things. We can remember and celebrate the “Big Name” saints – Peter, Paul, Mary, Mary Magdalene and so on – for whom we can give thanks and from whose best qualities we can draw inspiration. We can give thanks for all the saints in the way the term is used in the New Testament itself, as in today’s reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians: all the faithful in Christ, famous or unknown, living or dead.

And, we can reflect on *our* calling to be among the saints of God in our own time, a vocation which comes to us along with our baptism.

“Who, me?” we may ask. “We’re just trying to do our best, you know, follow “the golden rule” and so on. But we’re not *saints*.”

Saints are – and were – not perfect. Only Jesus, of all the people who ever walked the earth, was perfect. And yes, following the Golden Rule is part of the package – in fact it’s right here in today’s Gospel, in which Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Now, that sounds simple unless we think of the number of people whose approach to life is, “do to others before they get a chance to do it to me,” and I don’t just mean Tony Soprano, either. And then there are the even larger group of people whose approach is, “I’ll treat others the way they treat me.”

But that’s not what the Golden Rule says. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” – even or especially if you think there’s not the remotest chance of them doing that.

Oh, you mean including *those* people? Yeah, that’s where Christianity gets hard.

But we’re not done yet. Jesus also says, “I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...”

Sounds like a training regime for a spiritual “Olympic team,” or a pacifist equivalent of the Marine Corps. Yeah, something like that.

Jesus is not telling us to be doormats. And he certainly wants anyone who is threatened with or experiences abuse to be safe, let's be clear about that. But he does *not* want those among his followers "who listen," as he puts it, to retaliate in kind in response to wicked behavior. "An eye for an eye" ends up by making everyone blind. "Fight fire with fire" and the whole world eventually gets turned into Southern California when the Santa Ana winds blow in October.

Professional fire fighters use water to fight fires. And it's still very risky work. Christians are called to the same approach in spiritual conflicts. And that's still very risky work.

Just stand at the grave of Martin Luther King, Jr. if you don't think so. People don't always live long, comfortable, safe lives if they strive for justice even in peace-filled ways – perhaps especially if they are peace-filled people.

Go to the graves of the Christians of Uganda who stood up, non-violently against that East African country's brutal dictator Idi Amin in the 1970's. Go to the graves of the apostles themselves, or just think of them: only one died of old age. The rest were killed in the line of duty, preaching Jesus Christ and the opportunity for all people to be saved to people, and a government, which didn't want to hear about either.

Anybody heading for the exits yet? This business of being a Christian can be hard. We here, in America, in 2007, are reaping the fruits of thousands upon thousands of the saints who have gone before us. It has been well said that "freedom isn't free." It is also true, in the same sense, that "faith isn't free." Yes, the faith comes to us without charge as a gift of God but the faith exists today because of those who sacrificed much to receive it, spread it and keep it. The first leader of an independent Anglican Church, the author of the first Book of Common Prayer, Thomas Cranmer, was burned at the stake by Queen Mary of England. The first translator of the Bible into English who had his translation printed, William Tyndale, was hunted down by Henry VIII's secret police and likewise burned at the stake. And those are just two people from one country in one generation who gave their lives that we might enjoy what we have today [pick up a Bible and a BCP].

Faith is not free. And ultimately, of course, our faith, our salvation, our hope of heaven, our hope for the ultimate transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God, was made possible by Christ's awesome generosity giving his life so that sin be defeated and the world begun to be made new.

As a result, St. Paul writes in today's Epistle, we have received adoption into God's family – what an awesome thought that is – could there be anything higher! And the Holy Spirit we received in baptism is "the pledge of our inheritance" as God's children. That means the gift of the Holy Spirit is the "10% down" we receive now – like a down payment from God – who *never* defaults.

Let's think about the gifts of the Holy Spirit conferred at baptism: "the forgiveness of sin," "the new life of grace," being "sustained in the Holy Spirit," being given "an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and love God, and the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works."

That's a lot – and add to it all the guidance, strength, wisdom, hope and healing we and others do or could receive from God, all the love and benefits of Christian community, all the good that we and others can do as inspired by God – ALL that is just the 10% down!

If all the goodness we ever have or could experience on this earth is just the "10% down," just IMAGINE for a moment the "full payment of our inheritance."

That, folks, is called Heaven, which is literally more wonderful than we can imagine. And if the Kingdom of God tops that...!

So with all the generosity and sacrifice which have made it possible for us to have been freely given the faith and all the abundant life which lies ahead for those whom God invites to join his heavenly banquet, is it such a stretch that we should ourselves be generous in every way, and sacrifice so that the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are persecuted for their Christian faith shall be blessed by us as well as by Christ? And shall we not share this faith and its benefits as well as its high calling to others?

Shall we, indeed, accept the invitation to be saints of God in our own time?

(Singing) "They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still,
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,
For the saints of God are just folk like me
And I mean to be one too."

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ