

Marching With The Saints

Luke 6:17-26
November 7, 2010

I.

Today is All Saints Sunday, when we celebrate one of the principal feast days of the church. On the calendar All Saints Day actually was last Monday, the day after Halloween. But because it is so important the church's tradition calls us to observe it the first Sunday after the actual day.

So today we recognize all those people from the beginning of our church to the present time who, through their selflessness, generosity, and sometimes even martyrdom, helped build the church and bring Christ's love into peoples' lives.

I would begin by going back to Halloween night and asking whether any kids came to your doors dressed as saints. Some of them might have been wearing black and gold uniforms, but those aren't the saints we celebrate this morning. You might have seen some kids dressed as devils or demons, but probably no one showed up and said he was St. Thomas or she was Mother Theresa.

And those are examples of people we traditionally regard as saints in the church. It has been said we only can see the coming of God's kingdom because we stand on the shoulders of the giants who have gone before us. Through their work, courage, and sacrifices, most Christians today are able to worship in freedom and to publicly proclaim their faith.

And churches, hospitals, and schools are named after them. Books have been written about them. These heroes of the past who have served God and the church are among the saints we honor today.

But saints in the larger sense are not just historical figures. We also encounter saints in our lives now. God leads people to holy works all the time even though they might not have an official day named for them on the church calendar.

So we should not think that saints are people with whom we could never identify. Saints can be people just like us. St. Paul addressed many of his letters to "saints" in this sense. In the Apostles Creed we acknowledge our belief in the communion of saints as all Christians, living and dead.

And so it also is appropriate today to remember those who were part of our church family this year, and have gone to glory to join the saints in heaven. We lift up and honor the memories of Mamie Calmes and William Montjoy. May their souls, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

II.

But unity in the communion of saints does not always lead us into saintly lives. Early reformers of the church proclaimed that we simultaneously are saints and sinners. Our challenge is to emphasize the part about being saints, and to diminish the part about being sinners. How do we listen to the little angel whispering in one ear, and ignore the little devil whispering in the other?

Today's Gospel reading from Luke offers insights into that matter. It contains four blessings and four warnings. Blessed are the poor, Jesus said, and the hungry, and those who weep, and those who are hated by others. And he proclaimed warnings to the rich, and to those who are full. He warned people who were laughing, and those about whom others spoke well.

What's that about? Where are we in that picture? Well, we probably feel reasonably secure and well-off. And if we take the reading literally we might wonder whether we are the people Jesus was blessing. We are not poor, or hungry, or weeping. So, could we be in the other category? On its face the reading might suggest that we're more like those who will experience the woes.

But that would be a superficial reading of today's Gospel. It's not just a simple passage from Scripture. It's complex, and full of meaning for the people of Jesus' time, as well as for us today.

For example, we can understand today's reading from two perspectives. Both are legitimate interpretations and are not inconsistent. One relates to our spiritual lives as we worship and honor God, and the other speaks to our worldly lives as we use the blessings God has given us.

III.

Let's start with the spiritual aspect. And we can examine what Jesus might have meant by his references to blessings and woes. Are blessings equivalent to happiness, and do woes mean the same thing as misery?

Probably not. Jesus said blessed are the poor, and the hungry, and those who weep. He did not say happy are the poor, happy are the hungry, and happy are those who weep. That would have been unrealistic. People who are poor, hungry, and weeping usually are not very happy.

In fact, the emotion of happiness might more easily be attributed to those whom Jesus denounced. He said woe to the rich, to the full, and to those who are laughing. But those are the people who in our way of thinking are more likely to be happy, aren't they?

So today's lesson obviously goes beyond commonly understood meanings. And thus from this first perspective of spirituality Jesus was not speaking about economic conditions or social status, but rather those things that are inside us and define our characters.

He blessed those whose poverty was in their lack of pride and concern about themselves, and whose hunger was in a quest for righteousness and justice for others. And his warnings went to those who were the opposite. He declared woes upon those who were full of themselves, and who laughed as they consumed their own bounty at the expense of others.

This was a common thread running through many of Jesus' teachings. Elsewhere he said that those who would be first also must be last (Mk. 9:35), those who wish to be great must also be servants (Mt. 20:26), and it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

But that's not all there is to the reading. A few moments ago I said there was a worldly aspect to Jesus' words as well as a spiritual one. And the requirements of that worldly standard sometimes can be the more difficult to attain.

Just because people might go through the motions of Christian worship on Sunday does not automatically mean they truly are doing God's will during the week. We also are called to honor our church and community through the continuing generosity and service that was conspicuously absent from those upon whom Jesus cast woes in today's reading.

As I have mentioned on many prior occasions, we should remember that nowhere in the Bible did Jesus condemn wealth, and nowhere did he glorify poverty. He recognized that each contains dangers. Wealth can cause people to become self-absorbed and prideful with their own possessions, and poverty can cause people to grow bitter with envy and to become covetous.

And Jesus certainly did not call for the wholesale transfer of property from prideful and self-absorbed rich people to envious and covetous poor people. His message was far deeper than that, both for the rich and the poor.

Jesus blessed those who were living in poverty, hunger, and oppression not because it was a good way to live, but because he wanted to encourage and sustain them. Jews in first century

Palestine existed under brutal Roman domination with little chance for anything different, and Jesus offered them hope.

Then, on the other side of coin, Jesus denounced the way in which wealth can corrupt and separate people from God. He surely had in mind the rich who failed to even recognize the poor who were living right outside their gates. He proclaimed woes on the rich not because they were wealthy, but because they did not use their wealth wisely. They chose personal gratification over service to God.

It is very difficult to read the Bible, and then think only of ourselves. Everywhere we turn we encounter God's call to reach out to others, to help those in need, and to share our blessings. Those are the qualities that we recognize when we honor the saints.

And we also are called to remember the words of Jesus later in Luke's Gospel when he said, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (12:48).

IV.

So, what are we supposed to do? How do we be faithful stewards and faithful servants? Let me ask a hypothetical a question. Suppose Jesus were standing here today, in front of the altar here at St. Thomas. Now, I know Scripture has a different version of how he will come again. But please indulge me anyway. And suppose he would look around the church, and at each of us, and then proclaim some blessings and some woes. What would he say?

Well, I'm sure he would recognize all of the saints among us. And I know he would bless us again as he has so many times throughout our lives. But he also might say a few things that would tweak our consciences. I'm sure he could make me feel a twinge or two.

But I am not going to speculate further on that. I will leave my hypothetical question where it is, and just go back to the Gospel reading. Blessed are the poor and the needy and those who weep. Woe to the wealthy and the prideful and the self-absorbed. If we think about it we probably have some idea of where we stand.

At the end of the day we all know that we have been reasonably successful in our lives, and now we look behind that success and ask ourselves if we have been equally faithful. Are we using our blessings as God would have us do? Do our lives reflect the qualities of those early saints who put others ahead of themselves?

We've all heard that old gospel hymn, "When the Saints go Marching In." And even though it might make us think of the Superdome, the lyrics actually point to a future time of the coming of the God's kingdom.

But it doesn't have to be limited to the future. It also has been and is now. The saints have been marching in and are always marching in. They've been marching in for two thousand years. And, to mention those lyrics again, we know that as Christians we always are called to be in that number and march with them. It has been so ever since Jesus first told us to love one another.

And while we probably never will be official saints in the life of the church as an institution, we can be saints in the lives of others and in our common life here at St. Thomas. If we seek God's will through the Holy Spirit, if we share blessings that God has given us, and if we love others as Christ calls us to do, then we too always will be in that number. *Amen.*