

## “O When the Saints”

### Revelation 21: 1-6a

I need to start this sermon with a confession of sorts. I have an odd fascination with the Saints. Each day as part of my daily prayer life I look to see who the saint of the day is. I usually read his or her story and then say the prayer connected with this particular saint. I started this spiritual discipline a few years ago after attending a clergy self care conference. This conference was led by an Episcopal priest who introduced me to this spiritual discipline. The first day of the retreat she shared with us the story of a preacher/friar who had spent his life preaching. He founded the monastic movement called the Dominicans, and was someone in my mind who deserved the title saint. This preacher/friar gave his life for the gospel, preaching and devoting himself to study, living with God’s word. The next day, the conference leader shared with us the story of Herman of Alaska, a missionary to the Aleuts. She shared how this not so well known monk lived out the gospel message in Alaska, first by thinking his mission was to convert the “heathens” but soon realized that his mission had been transformed into protecting the natives from exploitation and abuse. By the end of his life, Herman of Alaska had become a living sanctuary for the natives in the area. Then on the last day, this Episcopal priest shared with us the story of Clare of Assisi. She was a young

woman who was so moved by the words of Francis of Assisi that she left her life of wealth, took up a vow of poverty, and devoted her life to caring for the poor in her hometown.

At first, when the leader of the retreat started sharing this daily discipline, I was skeptical. I wondered how any of this related to self-care, the real reason I was there at the retreat but I will admit that by the end of the week, I anxiously awaited the story of our saint for the day. I found myself mesmerized by their stories, renewed by their stories. I found myself surrounded by believers from the past who knew the church, who loved the church. I found myself surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who had experienced the same things that I had experienced along my faith journey, the same doubts, the same fears, the same amazement, the same wonderings of just exactly how was God working in my life. With each passing day, as I listened to the stories of the saints, I found myself connected across generations, across centuries, to people who had their lives so transformed by the Gospel message, had their lives so transformed by God's love that they could do nothing else but act, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God had come near for all of God's children. With each passing day, as I spent time with the saints, I was reminded why I became a person of faith in the first place. Just like these saints, I find comfort and strength in my calling as a follower of Jesus, because I know that I am a part of something bigger than myself. I know our connection with God

endures. I know that it is God's powerful love that binds us together as believers, past, present and future.

Now, I will be the first to admit that this particular spiritual discipline is odd for me as a Protestant. It is not in our "normal" list of acceptable Protestant prayer practices which usually includes things like Bible study, or morning devotions. But communing with the saints, this just isn't in our realm of comfortable understanding.

For one reason, when we start talking about the saints, it sounds too Catholic. Everyone might assume that I'm going to ask everyone to be looking for idols or prayer cards. Or maybe the next thing you know, this crazy preacher just might start asking us to celebrate Feast Days, honoring people who had done amazing things while they were alive or performed huge, life-changing miracles. I know how much we like to eat around here.

Or maybe just maybe when I say the word "saint", immediately our mind goes to people like Mother Teresa. Now that woman was a saint. She brought in 35,000 people off the streets of Calcutta as a servant of God. We are just lucky if we remember to read our Bibles every day. We are just ordinary people. We know we aren't Mother Teresa or Saint Francis or any other saint of the Church. They were special. We are just ordinary people.

Saints are pious people with their eyes lovingly lifted, gazing at the heavens, hands folded in prayer, and of course, the ethereal glow of a halo surrounding their heads. Not us. And if we are completely honest with ourselves, we will even admit that we shift uncomfortably in our seats when the title “saint” gets applied to those of us gathered in the pews. We are just ordinary people, who are doing the best we can to do to live out the Gospel message in our daily lives.

Well, I hate to burst everyone’s bubble but the saints were not perfect. They were human. In fact, many saints lead, let’s just say interesting lives before they heard God’s call. For example, Saint Ignatius was a soldier and a womanizer. He got hurt in battle and was sent home. While he was recuperating, he was bored and the only book available was the Bible so he read it... let me say that again, he read the Bible because he was bored not because he was devoted. But that reading, changed him and helped him become a saint of the church today.

Or there was another saint, in the third century, named St. Lawrence. He was burned to death on a grill, over hot coals. And with his last breath, called out to his executioners, "This side is done. Turn me over and have a bite." Or there is in the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, who prayed, "Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet."

Like I said, I hate to burst everyone’s bubble. But the saints weren’t perfect, far from it. In fact, Dorothy Day said, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be

dismissed that easily". As people of faith, We have mixed feelings about the saints. On the one hand, we admire them for their faith. But on the other hand, we know it is safe to we think we aren't saints, because then nothing will ever really be expected of us as people of faith. However, there is something else we need to know about when we talk about the saints. We need to know the history behind the term.

Here is everyone's language lesson for the day. The word "saints" "comes from a Greek word meaning "holy ones," a word which itself stems from a Hebrew one meaning "set apart" for the Lord's use." As people of faith, we have been set apart for the Lord's use. God is going to use us broken imperfect people to bring about God's Kingdom just like God has done from the very beginning of time.

That's the amazing blessing that I have experienced through this spiritual discipline of communing with the saints. I have come to realize that yes these saints of the church were something special. But it is not because they were gifted with more gifts of the Spirit than me, nor is it because they were gifted with more faith than me, and it certainly is not because they were better people than me. The reason why they are called saints of the church is because they were set apart, used by God to bring about God's Kingdom here on earth. They left us examples of what happens when we truly embrace what it means to be a child of God, when we became the people that God created us to be. These saints of the church left us

examples of what it means to be a disciple of Christ by living out their lives as beloved and loving children of God.

It was through their experience with God's transformative love that these saints, the ones set apart for the service of the Lord, became the people that God created them to be and inspire us to do the same. They inspire us to embrace our calling as children of God. They inspire us to become the people that God created us to be, to become more Christ like in all that we do. They encourage us and strengthen us to become kingdom people, people who practice justice, who show mercy, and who walk humbly with our God. These saints call us to and show us how to become all that we were called to be and to live up to our kingdom potential as children of God.

The blessing of these saints' stories is that they remind us that they were just ordinary people like us, human beings just like us, flawed and imperfect, people who were just trying to live out the Gospel message, trying to live out the promises of the Kingdom of God in their lives. The blessing of their stories is that they remind us what happens when we truly embrace the understanding that God's love calls us to become more than what we are now, to become more like Christ in our actions, to become more like the people God created us to be, to become the people that God calls us to be. The blessing of their stories is that they remind us that we are more than we think we are: We are more than just ordinary people, trying to

live our lives the best way we know how. We are children of God. We are people who are so loved by God that God sent God's only son for us. We are people who are vessels of light for a world that is in darkness. We are people who are called to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near. We are people who will become more like Christ when we see him and experience him more fully in our lives

This is why we lift up these saints of the church. It is to remind ourselves now and always that ordinary people become so much more when they respond to the call of discipleship. They become the people that God called and created them to be.

This is the grace offered to us now and always. It is through God's grace and our experience with God's transformative love that we become the people God created us to be. We know that we are already claimed and named as beloved children of God which is great but the blessing doesn't end there. When we embrace our title as children of God, as saints of the church, we are recognizing that being a child of God involves more: more than just who we think we are, more than what our limited thinking allows us to comprehend, more than what our limited vision allows us to see, more than what others say we have the ability to do and change. Being a child of God involves becoming someone who recognizes that God has already called us by name, that God has chosen us before the founding of the world. It involves becoming someone who recognizes that God has promised to

do great things through for the sake of all of God's children whom God loves so much. It involves being set apart for the service of the Lord in small and ordinary ways so that God's grace may flow in extraordinary ways.

Being a saint involves becoming someone who continues to reveal the same love in all that they do and say, the same love that God has share with all of us. Being saints involves becoming the people that God created us to be and living up to our full kingdom potential, just like all those who have gone on before us, leaving their examples of faith, hope and love.

Today, we lift up the saints of the church and remember their work and their ministry. Today, we remember the gifts that God gave them to build up the Body of Christ, gifts that healed, gifts that brought justice, gifts that inspired, gifts that showed love, gifts that brought the Kingdom of God near. Today, we remember that we have these same gifts as well. We as the ones set apart for God's service, the ones who are claimed and named as God's partners, have the same gifts and talents as all the saints before. We also have the same promise that God will use us, use our talents, use our abilities, use our interests, to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation just like God has done since the beginning of time.

Though a sad day, the grace of All Saints' Day is a reminder that we are not alone on our journey of faith. We are surrounded by a multitude who have walked the journey before us and they stand in solitary with us as we continue on our way.



We also realize that we are surrounded by glimpses of those who will walk this journey after us. These possibilities of hope and new life stand in solidarity now and always as we live out the vision of the Kingdom of God here on earth. We can do all these amazing and life giving things here and now as saints of God's church because we know that our God is so much more than our limited understanding can ever comprehend.

As we lift up our saints, the people who shaped us, the people who saw more in us than we could see ourselves, the people who loved us more than we could ever imagine, we celebrate the knowledge that they are not forgotten. Their stories and their examples of faith stay with us and continue to inspire us to become the people that God created us to be.

This Sunday, we celebrate all the saints, the saints who came before us, the saints who sit in the pews beside us, the saints who continue to shape our faith. But most especially, this Sunday, we celebrate the saint who we see each and every time we look into a mirror, the saint we see who is reflected back, shining with the love and grace of God for all to see.

May we always remember that we are all saints, set apart for the work of the Kingdom of God. Amen.