

Date: November 5, 2006

SUNDAY: All Saints

SERMON: Saints Are Lovers

Text(s): Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34

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Before we went to France, I had never paid much attention to the folks that in the Roman Catholic tradition are known as “saints.” From my low Protestant upbringing, with its emphasis on not straying too far from what the Bible teaches (whatever that means) I knew that the term “saints” is a common word used in the New Testament to describe all Christians, not just a select few. And the whole Roman Catholic process of canonization— all the criteria and investigations and reports of miracles and all of that— that determines whether someone was worthy of being called a saint, not to mention the whole vexing question of whether it’s legitimate to direct prayers to those so designated, was simply so foreign to my own history and background, I simply never thought much about it.

Living in Europe, however, it’s impossible to avoid the saints. You trip over them everywhere you turn. Hundreds of towns and villages are named for saints. On the TV news everyday, they mention which saint’s day it is that day, and of course, there is a different saint for every day of the year. Even though most western Europeans are determined secularists, they still all know on which saint’s day they were born. And of course, in virtually every church, there is fingernail or toe bone or lock of hair or even whole arms or feet preserved in a reliquary and belonging to the saint for whom the church is named. Coping with the saints became in itself, a whole new area of education for Carol and me. Of course we had the help of two indispensable guidebooks. The serious, scholarly one was the Oxford Dictionary of the Saints, which contained all the really pertinent and undisputably factual information about what is known about the various saints. The other was the somewhat less scholarly, but a lot more fun book called *Saints*

Alive! Everything You Need to Know about All the Saints You’ll Ever Need. In that book, we got all the legends that have grown up around particular saints served up in a light-hearted tone.

For example, I discovered that my patron saint was St. Lawrence. There is no Saint Larry, so St. Lawrence was the nearest we could come. Lawrence was a deacon in the church in Rome in the third century. Deacons in those days, because they were charged with caring for the poor and the widows and orphans, were sort of a combination of the church treasurer and church social worker today. He was also the Roman church’s librarian, which is why he is considered the patron saint of librarians. In the year 258, the emperor Valerian unleashed a vicious persecution against the Christians in Rome and ordered the executions of all bishops, priests, and deacons. Lawrence was ordered by the prefect to gather up all the treasures owned by the church and surrender them to the state. He asked for three days to do this work, and on the third day he assembled a large crowd of beggars, lepers, orphans, the blind, widows and other poor people, in front of the prefect’s palace, and said, “Here are all the church’s treasures.” Gutsy move, wasn’t it? The prefect, far from being enlightened, was enraged, and poor Lawrence was subjected to the most gruesome tortures, the final one of which was that he was placed on a gridiron and roasted over a bed of hot coals, which is the reason why he’s always depicted in art holding a gridiron. After a while, as the story goes, when he was near death, he spoke and said to his tormentors, “Turn me over, I’m done on this side.” Which is why he’s also considered the patron saint of cooks. Maybe that’s why I like him so much: books and food, which for me is an irresistible combination.

How much of Lawrence’s story is legendary and how much is historical beyond the fact that he was martyred on August 10 in the year 258 we’ll never know. But on the Feast of All Saints, I like to remember him, and his holy foolishness in the face of the unholy wickedness of corrupt and oppressive authority. Perhaps, in

the end, that may not be the worst way to confront rulers whose power has gone to their heads.

I'm glad that we have this day on our calendars, a day to remember and give thanks for those of our spiritual ancestors who have lived and died in the faith of Christ, and who make up that great multitude who now see God face to face. We remember them each time we gather at the Lord's Table and say the words, "And so with the whole company of heaven, and all your people now on earth, we praise you and join their unending hymn." We are part of the company of the saints.

What is it that makes a person a saint? Is it heroic courage in the face of oppressive power as in the case of St. Lawrence? Is it a life of holy piety and rigorous ascetic discipline? Is it the ability to work miracles? Last week, if you follow such things in the news, Pope Benedict has named a new American saint. Mother Théodore Guérin, an 18th century French-born nun who came as a missionary to Indiana to help educate the children of pioneer families. She established a new religious order, the Sisters of Providence, founded an academy that is now known as the College of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, and apparently was known as a tireless and visionary advocate for education for girls and women. So much so, that she was ordered to cease and desist by the Archbishop, who thought that educating women was clearly a waste of time and money. But Mother Théodore, like most real saints, was not in this to win popularity contests or kiss up to her superiors. Like most saints, she was a very strong-willed, possibly even somewhat cranky person, and she had a very clear vision of her vocation. So she ignored the archbishop, and finally, when he himself tried to get the Vatican involved, the Vatican responded by removing the archbishop, thereby freeing Mother Théodore to get on with her good work.

Both of our lessons this morning, provide us with clues as to what it is that makes a saint.

In our gospel lesson, when the scribe came to Jesus and asked him "*Which commandment in the law is the greatest,*" he asked a question that many before him had asked.

Jesus' reply appeals to the words that are still the central confession of the Jewish faith. *Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

The fact that Jesus appeals to this central confession of Israel's faith shows that he understood his message not as something radically new, but rather that the God to whom he was calling people to respond in faith and obedience was the same God who made covenant with their ancestors, and that God's demand and claim on his people had not changed. If Israel's God is the only true God, then God's people can have only have one loyalty. Loyalty to this God is what grounds our existence. It is what keeps human life from dissolving into chaos. The greatest commandment is a command to remember who we are and who God is and to keep our loyalty to that God constant and undivided.

Nor is Jesus original when he links the command to love one's neighbor as oneself to the command to live in covenant loyalty to God. The Ten Commandments, the summary of the Mosaic law through which Israel's faith was expressed, are rather neatly divided into the first four commands which define one's loyalty to God and the last six which deal with one's relationship to one's neighbor. A century or so before Jesus, a mischievous rabbinical student had asked the great rabbi Hillel if he could recite the whole Torah standing on one foot. Hillel promptly drew up one foot and replied, "To love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor is the whole Law. All the rest is commentary."

The man's response to Jesus' answer shows that his question was not frivolous, but a

serious question to determine where Jesus stood in relation to the religion of Israel. *“You're right,”* he says, *“To love God with one's whole self, and one's neighbor as oneself is the whole law.”* And Jesus commends him as one who has correctly grasped what it means to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God. *“You're not far from the Kingdom,”* Jesus tells him. By saying the man is “not far from the kingdom,” Jesus is not pointing to some deficiency. Rather he's using words the same way we do when we congratulate someone's achievement by saying, “Not bad, not bad at all.” We mean, in fact, that it's very good. And that's what Jesus is saying to the man here. “You've got it. That's what the Kingdom of God is about.”

Jesus is saying that God has always required covenant loyalty or steadfast love to God and neighbor. The problem is not with knowing what it is that God requires. The problem, as we all know too well, if we know ourselves at all, is in doing what God requires. The greatest saints are not super-heroic figures who achieve spiritual heights unattainable by the rest of us mere mortals. We do not have to go off into the desert and meditate for years in solitude to become a saint. We don't have to exhibit heroic courage or even gutsy black humor like St. Lawrence in the face of pain or suffering. We don't have to be miracle workers or theologians or rise to high ecclesiastical office. We only have to be great lovers.

Our Old Testament lesson tells us a story of a woman who was just such a great lover. Ruth was the Gentile daughter-in-law of Elimelech and Naomi, a Jewish couple from Bethlehem. They had moved into the territory of Moab, where the people were of Canaanite origin and were pagans. While living there, their two sons married Moabite women. Think of this as an early example of bicultural and inter-religious marriage. In the course of time, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi as the dependent of their sons, which was how things normally work in tribal

societies. All women had their place within society only as a result of their link to a male protector, either their husbands or their sons. But then the abnormal happened; both of Naomi's sons died as well, leaving her and her two pagan daughters-in-law without any male protectors. Now the daughters-in-law were young enough that they could probably find other husbands, but Naomi is a widow of a certain age, and she knows that she's not likely to be able to find a husband for herself.

So she tells Orpah and Ruth to leave her, rejoin their families and tribe, and make a new start on their lives. Orpah sees the sense in this, and does what Naomi urges her to do, though she protests her desire to stay with Naomi. But Ruth, on the other hand, is adamant. In one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, she says,

“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you. Where you go, I will go; and where you dwell, I will dwell. Your people shall be my people, and your God mine. Where you die, I too, will die—and there will I be buried. And not even death will part me from you.”

That is covenant loyalty or steadfast love. This is not love that is merely a romantic ideal, this is not simply the deep family bond of obligation and affection. This is love as an unshakeable commitment. This is love as a way of life. This is love that will spend the church's material treasure on caring for the poor. This is love that will defy an archbishop in order to bring education and opportunity to the children of frontier families. This is the love that will make solid marriages, the love that will bind up broken family relationships, the love that will disarm the hatreds and greed that are the cause of war, the love that will bridge the gaps between the haves and the have-nots. This is a love that will cleave to the beloved through thick and thin, through sunshine and through shadows, through danger and ease, a love that goes all the way to the end of the world if necessary. This is love like God's love for us.

It's no accident that when St. Matthew writes his genealogy of the Messiah, he looks back into Jesus' family tree and finds not only the usual list of male progenitors, but in a very unusual move, he includes Ruth, this remarkable lover, who became the great-grandmother of King David, from whose line, the Messiah was promised.

Who could have guessed that a pagan Gentile from Moab would have ended up being the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, and have her name remembered centuries later by a church that had come into being around its faith that in one of her descendants, Jesus of Nazareth, God was revealed as a God of covenant loyalty and redeeming love, not only for Israel, but for all the world?

I'm sure each of us knows a saint who has exemplified for us what it means to truly love God and our neighbors. They may not be the ones singled out by the church for special attention and commendation. They're more likely to be what Peter Marshall once called "the saints of the rank-and-file." Ordinary people, who have or had an extraordinary ability to love.

As we gather around the Table of the Lord this morning, in company with that great host which no one can number, ceaselessly singing their praises around the throne of God, we will remember those of our own congregation who have joined that heavenly host. We will give thanks for their lives and for their examples of love which they offered us. And let us resolve that we too shall become saints, for that is what we are by grace, and what we are called to become by faith, hope and love.