

Students of Faith

St. Matthew 23:1-12

Yesterday was All Saints' Day. Since you are Presbyterians, this fact probably escaped you. Since you are Presbyterians, it may escape you even now as to why that is important. We Presbyterians have never been very enthusiastic about saints. We have always been suspicious about them, because, first, we have worried that attention to saints distracts the mind from wholehearted worship of God. Second, we have assumed that there is no hierarchy among those that God calls and loves. So to call one person a saint and not another runs against the grain for us.

But it is for that latter reason that we should be more enthusiastic about All Saints' Day, for it celebrates *all* saints, both yesterday and today. That is why in the Presbyterian Church calendar All Saints' Day is highlighted and to be commemorated, although we do not commemorate a day for any single saint. This way fits our egalitarianism just fine.

If, however, the day is to be appropriately celebrated and commemorated, then it is important that we get straight on just what a saint is. We need to do so not just to know whom we are celebrating, but, just as important, so that we might know what we are to become, for to be a saint is the common destiny of *all* those who would love and have faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is why in the New Testament believers are all regularly called "the saints."

So what is a saint? The English word, taken from a Latin root, simply means "Holy." Most languages describe saints similarly, although in most languages, one doesn't have to worry about the root. The word for "saint" and for "holy" is the same. French or Greek tongues say, and their ears hear, simply "Holy Paul" or "Holy John." But that doesn't entirely answer the question as to *what* a saint is, what a saint does. What makes someone holy or saintly?

One might here generate a list of qualities that a saint should have. These would likely

include carefully observing the obligations of worship, being unstinting in piety, and knowing God's word and teaching it effectively to others. But are these things enough?

Not exactly. After all, if you go back to the New Testament, that set of criteria would fit the Pharisees better than anybody else. They certainly played the part well. They observed the obligations of worship, they were knowledgeable about God's word and they taught it to others; they had the authority of sitting in Moses' seat. All of these things are parts of the definition of holiness.

Yet, as we are told in this morning's Gospel lesson, if everybody else in his day saw the Pharisees this way, Jesus certainly did not. Why not? As he saw it, they were hypocrites; they did not practice what they taught, they laid the full burden of the Law on others but didn't help others lift that heavy burden. Moreover, what they chiefly loved was the *reputation* of being holy; the inner substance, they didn't seem to care so much for. They loved to be seen and honored, but the essential work and substance of holiness escaped them.

If this is the way it is with saints, it is small wonder, then, that the world is often suspicious of saints or even of anybody who aims at holiness. Here is one place where Jesus and the rest of the world actually seem to agree on morals. *Everybody* intensely dislikes those who would be saints but who only want its appearance. There *are* far too many whose claim to sainthood does not bear close inspection. There *are* far too many self-described saints who, like the Pharisees, are arrogant, dogmatic in teaching others what they ought to do and believe, and who do not do or believe what they teach. And because these hypocrites are so obnoxious, not only are we suspicious about them, we positively delight whenever they get their come-uppance. It has been a theme of comedy since the time of the ancients. Plato's *Euthyphro*, Molière's *Tartuffe*, Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry* are all changes rung on this theme.

But there is a point where the world and Jesus disagree on saintliness and those who aspire to it and it is here: the world laughs at the ridiculous pretensions of wanna-be saints, as it should. However, there are a lot of opinion makers who also think that it is foolish even to attempt saintliness; the very attempt is to be mocked and even declared to be a little inhuman, because it tries to go beyond normal humanity. Jesus, on the other hand, thinks no such thing. Faith and holiness and saints are the only things that do matter. Going beyond the normal is important. That is why he is so intent on discrediting the Pharisees, for they pretend to something high, but act it out in such average way. They bring the high into the regions of the low; they debase what is transcendent. Jesus is concerned that we get it right and that we not only aim high but live at that level, too.

But how does one do that? What is the element we are missing in our attempts to define the saints? It is, somewhat ironically, for those who are expected to aim and live at transcendent levels, very simply humility. Whereas the leaven in the loaf for the Pharisee is hypocrisy and appearing great, for the saint it is humility and appearing lowly. Whereas the Pharisees are pious but self-important and arrogant, spiritual show-offs as it were, saints are very simply humble. As our Lord says very plainly, “the greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” It is that virtue of humility that more than anything else makes the saint and gives us access to the transcendent. Without humility, all the other parts of saintliness are a hollow shell.

Understand how important humility is to saintliness. It is something that makes the saint radically different than anybody else, including those who possess most of the other virtues. Thus the humility that Jesus recommends is not everything the Pharisee does, just minus the arrogance; humility is not just the absence of self-importance. Humility is something far deeper, a positive

virtue on its own that is so deep that might be said to be essential to faith itself, something that distinguishes faith from all counterfeits and that also turns faith into saintliness. For saints just don't do the right thing, and saints don't just believe the right things without doubts. Saints look at the world differently; their faith, which is humility, makes them see things differently. How?

In the midst of his denunciation of the Pharisees, Jesus tells the crowds this; "You are not to be called rabbi (that is, teacher) for you have one teacher, and you are all students." That is, of course, a moral recommendation for a certain sort of humility. Don't set yourself up above others, the way the Pharisees do, it tells us. But it also says something even deeper about faith and humility. For while faith certainly believes any number of things, faith is not just believing things. It is, first and foremost, believing in and trusting a teacher, indeed, one particular teacher, and in believing and trusting this one teacher, all the faithful, all the saints are students. To trust a teacher, to trust that you yourself cannot provide the answers you need to life is humility. Thus, I want to propose, the humility that is at the root of faith and that the saints live out is simply the willingness to be taught. It is so much so that humility is *not* something that is added to piety, justice, knowledge of God's word, and all the other virtues. Humility is, as the virtue of teachability, the virtue that lets God give us all the other virtues.

Let me illustrate it this way. I taught college and seminary students long enough to know that there are certain students who are sometimes pretty close to unteachable. That is not always because they are stupid or even lazy. They wouldn't have gotten in college or seminary if they were. In fact, many of them are actually quite bright. Some, although not many, are even "A" students. What makes them unteachable can be a sense that they already know it all, although after a couple of exams their minds can be disabused of that notion. But more essential to their unteachability is their inability to trust the teacher. When I encountered it, it was an attitude that

had at its core a belief that somehow *whatever* I was saying, or whomever they were reading, whether it was Plato or the Gospel of John, was just my opinion or Plato's or Jesus' opinion. For these students there was nothing new there that they had to stretch themselves to grasp. If there was anything new and outside their comfort zone, they quickly rejected it.

The phenomenon is familiar enough. I am sure that you will not be surprised to hear that, even in teaching religion, the group includes believers as well as non-believers. For some people, faith as they practice it is something that closes off the world, instead of opening it up. It is as if Jesus himself, having once spoken to them, couldn't tell them anything more. Having once believed the truth, they can't trust enough to be taught all that the truth involves. Such students often become modern day Pharisees.

On the other hand, there are students who are every teacher's joy. Some of them are "A" students, but, again, certainly not all of them. They look at the world with wide-open eyes, trusting that there is something out there that can surprise and delight them, something out there that can give meaning to life, even if it means hard work or sacrifice. They trust that the teacher is there for the reason that teachers are supposed to be there – to help them find out just what does give meaning to life. By no means are they naive and incredulous, willing to buy any old line that is handed them. Often they are very critical students and they push their teachers very hard, for they are never willing to be satisfied with answers that don't make sense. When they are critical it is because it makes so much difference to them to get it right. Yet, even when they are smart, even when they are critical, even when they are questioning, these students have a certain humility, a humility that allows them to look at the world and others with a belief that the world and others have something to teach them, and a humility that is a willingness to change their lives for that pearl of great price.

That is the way it is with faith – and with the saints of faith. Faith does not just believe – it believes because it trusts the teacher, and it trusts the teacher because he has the words of life, not us. When Jesus, during a rough patch with the crowds asked the disciples if they, too, wanted to desert him because his teaching was not easy, Peter simply confessed, “Where should we go, Lord? You have the words of Life.” And for that reason, faith is always humble, for it is never confident in its own strength. It depends upon continually recognizing that we need to be taught.

For that reason holiness is above all a matter of life long learning. It is for that reason that we don’t just talk about having faith, as if that settled it all; it is why we talk about the *life of faith*. For faith is never settled – it continually reaches out and questions and takes in what it is taught.

That, of course, is why in every church throughout the world the saints do not stop education at Sunday School or confirmation, but continually have adult education classes. It is why we have Bible studies. It is why we pray, for prayer is not just laying out our requests and gratitude to God, a continual chattering about things that God already knows. Prayer is also taking time to be silent and to listen. Prayer is also reading scripture and just plain thinking on it so that the Word that enlightens every person may enlighten us.

And that is why, above all, we come to this table. Here we do not ‘symbolize’ anything. We remember what Christ has done for us, and in remembering we offer ourselves to be fed by him. Here in prayer and thanksgiving he comes to us in his body and blood and feeds us by his word. We need only to be humble enough to say that we cannot have life otherwise, that we cannot have it by ourselves. We need only have the faith that in his feeding us that we will be taught, and that he will show us the whole of the wonder that created and dwells in the world and that will make us saints just as it has always made them.