“Glory Be and the Saints Be Praised!”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

I want to tell a little tale on myself, which Diana knows because she was part of it. I founda funny to me mask at Walgreen’s the other day. The costume had a bright, red metallic devil’s face. I showed it to Diana when I saw her at the checkout counter and I said, “Look what I found; it’s perfect!” Her response was to say, “oh, you wouldn’t wear that, would you?” I thought, oh yes, the irony might be lost on people. I mention that now because I was thinking a lot about Halloween this week, in part because I had read in an online post on our Facebook page someone who said, simply, “I’m sorry, but a church shouldn’t celebrate Halloween. I thought about it a lot before responding, quoting the apostle Paul, because I take very seriously that consideration, and the question of what we are celebrating. Truthfully, I think what we are honoring and celebrating is children in our community who like to have a safe place to come and where the spirit of All Saint’s Day, and All Hallow’s that is, All Saints’—Eve has been lost and muddied in the images of the walking dead, and witches, and princesses, and all manner of Marvel heroes. The reason for our gathering together is the joy of celebration—and the sweet tooth. I was thinking a lot about Halloween too, in part thanks to Facebook, which is both a blessing and a curse. I see pictures of my girls from ten years ago, and at Halloween I saw pictures of my girls and I found myself wishing I had been more attentive so that I would have known what would be the last time that we trick or treated together and the last time that they trick or treated, period. I think I would have liked to have some kind of ceremony for that last time. There ought to be a ritual for some of life’s simpler endings, ones on which we have grown to depend. Indeed, to make sense of the significance of emotions, sometimes sadness, sometimes elation, rituals are a part of our human make-up. It is probably why a lot of us are here today. There is a lot to be said for ritual as a means to process change and to dignify and even sacralize, to make sacred certain moments.

This is certainly a large part of why we come to church. We make worshipping God a central focus of our week when we gather together in thanksgiving and praise. Still, each church body has its own varieties of rituals and each denomination through the years has emphasized different practices as particularly significant. Although we sometimes may intentionally distance ourselves from our Catholic brothers and sisters, heeding the memories of our reforming forebears when we remember that each one of us has an equal relationship with God, there are some ways in which I have always envied Catholic liturgy. I also have sometimes envied my Catholic and Eastern Orthodox friends their veneration of the saints. However, I also love the way in which we Protestants hold up “the communion of saints” to be representative of a far wider body, and one that we can know intimately.

Intimate knowledge is, I think, the part of honoring the saints that I have envied. Somehow, we believe that those persons we call saints have had a deeper knowledge of God—somehow a closer relationship or more honorable connection with the creator. Michael D. Wuchter tells how he “asked a study group of students once to define ‘saint’ and then to name some saints. Their definitions and candidates all seemed to fall into one or more of three categories: "A saint is someone who is either deified, dead, or different." That about sums it up, doesn’t it? “First there were those saints who are practically deified. From the ancient stories about them, they seem pretty godlike in total personality. We envision them with halos. They are the superstars of past ecclesiastical piety. You can easily tell who they are because "saint" seems to be a part of their name. Saint John, Saint Mark, Saint Augustine, Saint Francis. I want to add St. Joan and St. Elizabeth and others -- yet also all these saints are apparently removed from us by a large slab of time.”

Inasmuch as we often relegate God to a place or purpose somehow distant from us, unreachable in this age, we do the same with those we call saints. We believe that their holiness is unattainable to us, because we can never be *good* enough; we can never be close enough to God, for all our reaching out. Heaven is never a place on earth, and God’s real servants are so close to God that our own attempts at goodness seem paltry in the face of the hell around us. So, saints are deified, and we look at *ourselves* and measure ourselves as coming up short.

“All the saints in the second category that were listed by the students in [Wuchter’s] study group, except for one, were dead. They were people in the past who had died in the faith, and in most cases died for the faith due to intense persecution. This was important for canonization by [his] study group -- Saint Stephen and Saint Peter -- and listed here were more modern names -- like Dietrich Bonhoeffer -- a young pastor and theologian who was executed by the Nazis toward the end of World War II -- saints as people who had put their bodies on the line for their faith and were killed. So, are we to be close to God, in intimate relationship with God only when we have died, and only if our faith has brought us to suffering? Apparently that is the view that many people have of sainthood.”

Personally, I have an easier time with the third category of saints that students in Wuchter’s class outlined. More in keeping with what I know as a biblical definition of holy as *separated for God’s purposes* is this third category. “The students agreed that saints are people that are faithfully different. Saints were willing to go against the flow of the ordinary, to risk and sacrifice their lives for their faith. In our initial discussion, it was in this category that the students placed the one, contemporary saint that was a part of their list: Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa was a little, fragile woman living out her life as a part of a religious order serving in the city slums of Calcutta, India and other parts of our world where human need and desperation seem to peak. But you know she hasn’t been canonized but has only been considered for it. I spoke of her last week and went looking to find out whether this was so.

In the eyes of our society, she was a very different kind of person -- a woman who, it appeared to the world, had sacrificed what most people seem to define as pleasure and comfort and success so that she could minister to those who are most obviously in physical need. Her ministry was in the very style of Jesus Christ. She was a woman who had forsaken a biological family and personal safety and any kind of possessions. She was a woman who fasted, wore a habit, spent hours in prayer -- a person who was very different -- like Saint Francis caring for the birds and talking to the birds.

Respected, revered -- Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize. A contemporary at that time, but it appears to us she was someone who was very different from us. But aren’t we supposed to be different from others, as well? We are united in and as the Body of Christ. We celebrate that unity this morning in the bread and the cup of Communion. We celebrate our membership in the Communion of Saints when we do that. So, how do we make ourselves different? Jesus told us how in very distinct terms, and in doing so didn’t call us to positions of honor or to the false sense of security that comes from violence, but to positions of blessedness, of blessed, intimate relationship with God.

Hear these words again as our Lord teaches us, as we sit at his feet: **3**“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
    for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
**4**Blessed are those who mourn,
    for they will be comforted.
**5**Blessed are the meek,
    for they will inherit the earth.
**6**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
    for they will be filled.
**7**Blessed are the merciful,
    for they will be shown mercy.
**8**Blessed are the pure in heart,
    for they will see God.
**9**Blessed are the peacemakers,
    for they will be called children of God.
**10**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
    for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

**11**“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. **12**Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

I wonder if you have ever used the expression of someone you have known. Oh, “she’s a saint,” or “he’s a saint.” When you’ve had that thought, I wonder if you remember the lessons of mercy, meekness, and righteousness they have embodied. Maybe our looking at faith, even at heaven as something lived actively in the now, instead of a goal for the future will help us all to live differently. Not deified, not dead, but different because of faith in our redeeming, merciful, loving God. For over forty years I have quoted a line from the *The Music Man*: “Glory be and the saints be praised!” cried out the sometimes more irreverent mother figure.

That kind of exuberant shout is what I imagine happening in the powerful scene represented in our passage from Revelation this morning. While I don’t necessarily conceive of the streets of gold that are used figuratively in other passages of this book, Revelation, I do imagine a people united in outward praise and thanksgiving for all that is and has been provided to them. In this season of our lives that makes us worry there will never be an end to violence, we can choose to be peacemakers and consider what it is to be meek. There is no perfection in this time, in this age, as Jesus calls it. What falls to us to do and be, though, is what blesses others and, in so doing, blesses us. Still, listening to scripture we understand that we have only a foretaste of the abundant blessing, of the abundant peace that will in its fulness exist only in God’s time, in heaven. On this Communion Sunday, as we come forward to receive the elements, we also look forward to Jesus’ coming again, in glory, in this indescribable, unimaginable glory (though John imagines it in Revelation). What will that glory be, and who might Jesus find? Those saints who *have* gone before us already know God’s perfect love and justice now, in heaven with God. Still, we who name ourselves among the faithful have a job to do to bring about God’s reign on earth until that mystical, mysterious time when there is somehow perfect peace and justice, in Christ. We who believe in the glory of God and the power of the Holy Spirit working through us have a job to do. We who rest on the hope that Jesus gives us for our salvation have in front of us the task of living into his plan for the earth and God’s people: the plan that is righteousness, mercy and love. May we see a glimpse of this ever so different path and ever so different life as we live into our own call to sainthood, the community of believers. Amen.