

SLD06.18.06 11th Ordinary
EPC
Mark 4:24-34
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Paying Attention to the Saints”

A couple weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost, the birthday of the church universal, which marks a sort of mid-point in the church year, a watershed, if you will, a shift in liturgical focus. In late November, early December, our lectionary, or church calendar of worship, begins with Advent, when we anticipate and prepare for Jesus' birth. Then, from the time Jesus gets born clear through the 8-week season of Easter, lectionary turns our focus to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But once, 50 days after Easter, we get to Pentecost Sunday and the church gets born again, lectionary shifts our attention again, away from **Jesus'** life on earth to **our** life on earth. So from today all the way to next Advent, you and I will be examining and celebrating in worship the growth and development of Christ's **post**-resurrection body - the church - and its disciples – you and me and all who came before us.

We call this period “Ordinary Time,” which seem especially fitting in this case. Although “Ordinary Time” is meant to refer to the absence of high holidays, during the coming weeks I think of it more in terms of a time to examine the lives of ordinary people who became extraordinary witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A few years ago as I pondered how best to approach this season of focus on discipleship, it occurred to me that we have available to us a whole body of

information and example of discipleship rarely plumbed in the Protestant tradition. And that resource is the lives of the Christian saints. Since then, I've made it something of a tradition each summer to preach a series on saints. It's been fun for me each year to pull together a list of admirable holy ones and commence learning not only about their stories but about what message their lives might offer particular meaning for our own discipleship today.

This summer I'll be preaching on Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Mary, mother of Jesus, Dorothy Day, St. Francis, St. Clair and Father Thomas Keating. Also, Carolyn Christie and Johnson Kinyua get to choose the saints they'll preach on when I'm away on vacation.

But before I launch into my "summer series on saints," I'd like to review with you the reasons why we Christians of the Reformed tradition have not, historically, paid much attention to the saints. Which then, of course, gives me an opportunity to remind us all that that's what we Presbyterians are – Christians of the Reformed tradition. Not everybody knows that. But I want everyone to know that. My sister Dina, who's been a deacon and an elder and a member of the Presbyterian church since birth, e-mailed me the other day and asked me what being Reformed tradition meant. Makes me nuts. Actually, makes me wonder about those mid-western Presbyterians up in Chicago where she's been living.

You hang around a Presbyterian church, you need to know that we hail from the *Reformed tradition*, our worship is *Reformed worship*, the essential tenets of our beliefs are grounded in *Reformed theology*.... And what "being

reformed” means is that our belief and practice hails from the great Protestant reformation of the 16th century in Europe. And what was being ‘protested against’ (Protestants? Protesters? Get it?) and reformed in 16th century Europe was 16th century European Catholicism. Which gives you a hint as to why we Reformed Protestants have historically had little to do with historical Christians canonized by the Catholic church as saints.

Keep in mind that all those great 16th European Reformers like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, started out as dyed-in-the-wool Catholics. And when they first started struggling in their hearts and thinking their great thoughts and challenging their church, they weren’t so much trying to start new denominations as they were attempting to alter (or re-form) what they regarded as the distorted, superstitious and even heretical practices of their own mother church. And among those practices was the enormous energy and investment poured into the Catholic cult of saints.

Now, it wasn’t that the reformers didn’t esteem these historical Christians. But in their eyes the Catholic worship of the saints had become anathema (or totally against) what the reformers felt were essential theological principles. They called the first of these principles “Soli Deo Gloria,” or worship is owed to God alone, believing that “The worship of any other takes away what is properly only God’s. Observing the popular piety of the late medieval cult of saints, John Calvin wrote:

They indeed called thee the only God, but they did so while transferring to others the glory which thou hadst claimed for thy majesty. Thy Christ was indeed worshipped as God and retained the name of Savior; but where he ought to have been honoured, he was left almost destitute of

glory. For spoiled of his own virtue, he passed unnoticed among the crowd of saints, like one of the meanest of them.¹

Later church fathers wrote in our Westminster Confession of Faith (6.105), that “Religious worship is to be given to God, the father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to God alone: not to angels, saints, or any other creatures.”

The second principle (*mediator Dei*) assaulted by the worship of saints was the Christ’s unique role of Mediator between God and man, a role that scripture assigns to Christ alone. (I Tim 2:5) Any notion of the intercession of the saints, the reformers believed, tended to detract from the sole mediatorship of Christ.”²

The reformers’ third objection (*justificatio*) might be a little harder for us to relate to. There was a popular belief going around back then that certain holy people accumulated more merit than they needed to achieve their salvation. So the idea was if you prayed to certain saints, you could get them to transfer some of their merits to your flagging account. Well, you can imagine how nuts that made Luther and Calvin, convinced as they were that a) salvation is by grace alone – that is, we don’t merit it by our or anybody else’s good works; and b) if anybody had any extra merit chips to share, it would Christ, who had already distributed them freely to all through his death for our salvation.

Finally, (*communio sanctorum*) reformed theologians balked at the Catholic reverence of the saints because, like the practice of ranking sins,

¹ *Hungryhearts*, Winter 2003, Vol XII, No. 4., Published by the Office of Spiritual Formation of the PC(USA). p. 1 Quoting from John Calvin, *Theological Treatises. Library of Christian Classic. Ed. JKS Reid. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954. p. 247.*

² *Ibid. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Vols 20-21. Library of Christian Classics. Ed. John T. McNeill. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, 2.8.25.*

qualitatively different levels of holiness called into question the basic belief that Christians are justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8).³

In short, so as far as the reformers were concerned, there was to be no more praying to St. Andrew for a husband, or to St. Jude for impossible causes, or to St. Christopher for traveling mercies. To Luther and Calvin and Zwingli, all that statuary and all those candles and all that importuning to icons for intervention was bunk. And worse. And as a result, most of us growing up Protestant never learned much about the saints, never heard their stories, and rarely pondered their special gifts or lessons for us today.

But times are changing. Over the last several decades a liturgical renewal in Protestant churches has resulted in more openness to and exploration of many practices and understandings of the early church. This is not to deny that many of these early practices underwent distortions and misapplications in one century or another. But what with less burning at the stake these days, and an ever renewing hunger for spiritual depth, the way seems clearer for theologians, pastors, and lay people alike to discern, reclaim and re-“institute,” if you will, certain meaningful rituals and practices of yore.

A thoughtful study of the lives of saints can be viewed as helpful in formulating “a holistic sense of church history.” Writes Craig Douglas Erickson of the PC(USA) Office of Spiritual Formation, “Many Protestant churches have an embarrassingly low estimation of the millennium and a half between the close of the New Testament era and the sixteenth century reformation.”⁴ Examining the

³ Hungryhearts, p.2

⁴ Ibid.

lives of people who have lived the gospel in some aspect of their lives provides a witness to the diversity of people through the ages who have been transfigured by the Holy Spirit and teaches us about the variety of paths of discipleship available to us today.

Hear these words from the II Helvetic Confession in our own Book of Confessions:

We acknowledge (the saints) to be living members of Christ and friends of God who have gloriously overcome the flesh and the world. Hence we love them as brothers (and sisters) and also honor them; yet not with any kind of worship but by an honorable opinion of them and just praise of them. We also imitate them. For with ardent longings and supplications we earnestly desire to be imitators of their faith and virtues, to share eternal salvation with them, to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ...

We confess, writes the 16th century Swiss author of this confession, Heinrich Bullinger, that the remembrance of saints, at a suitable time and place, is to be profitably commended to the people in sermons, and the holy examples of the saints set forth to be imitated by all.⁵

Before I begin my summer series on saints, I believe it's important for you and I to remember that, as 21st century protestants of the Reformed tradition, we are turning to the lives of those who came before us not to worship them, but to know them, to honor them, and to understand from whence our own spiritual inheritance has sprung. The saints are our spiritual ancestors, fervent Christian believers every one, whose personal faith and thoughtful revelation provided the foundation on which many 16th century reforms were based.

Some were spiritual mystics, some were activists, some were considered madmen and -women, fools for Christ. And then, of course, there continue to be

⁵ Book of Confessions, 5.026, 5.226 (II Helvetic Conf).

the flesh-and-blood folks who comprise our own personal list of holy ones – the people in our own church, or families, or histories, whose peace, or compassion, or faith, or generosity of spirit we admire and wish to emulate. Because this is the *real* value of saints, isn't it, at least for us Protestants. Not someone to pray to but someone to imitate.

One person models compassion; another, self-sacrifice; another, wisdom; another, spiritual insight; another, a flaming passion for God, each in their own way a living text of scripture, an embodiment of the Word, an agent of the Spirit through whom Jesus reminds us how we are to be.

So whether we're talking about a legendary great of Christian history or a modern day gospel model, someone who changed the course of human history or simply moved our heart one day, saints are friends and teachers who embody the teaching of Jesus Christ, offering us proof that the gospel can, indeed, be lived.

To the glory of God. Amen.