

SLD06.19.05 12th Ordinary
EPC
Matthew 10:24-39
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Living the Gospel – The Example of the Saints”

Remember Pentecost Sunday several weeks ago when we celebrated the gift of the Spirit in our midst? Well, I remarked then that Pentecost marks a sort of mid-point in the church year, a watershed, if you will, in liturgical focus

Remember, the church year begins in late November, early December, with Advent and its earnest anticipation of Jesus' birth. Then from Christmas clear through the 8-week season of Easter, our focus shifts primarily to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But once, 50 days after Easter, we get to Pentecost and the church gets born again, our attention in worship shifts somewhat away from *Jesus'* life on earth and toward the growth and development of Christ's post-resurrection body on earth (that is, the church, and its disciples.) Throughout the long span of Ordinary Time stretching from lazy summer vacations to frenetic fall routines, we attend more in worship to all our personal and institutional efforts to embody in our lives the truths, principles and challenges that Jesus taught and modeled.

A few years ago when I was pondering how best to approach this period of focus on the development of discipleship, it occurred to me that we have some resources available to us regarding the post-resurrection church rarely plumbed in the Protestant tradition. And that resource is the lives of the Christian saints.

Now there are some good reasons why we Christians of the Reformed tradition (and listen, that's what we Presbyterians are – Christians of the

Reformed tradition, hear? Y'all need to know that. Or maybe / just need y'all to know that because I've been detecting some serious cluelessness here of late. And you hang around a Presbyterian church, you need to know how we hail from the *Reformed tradition*, how our worship is *Reformed worship*, how the essential tenets accepted by our ordained ones are grounded in *Reformed theology*...if I'm still around in the Fall, maybe I'll preach a series of sermons on what it means to be a part of the Reformed tradition. But meanwhile, for our purposes today, just know that our tradition, our worship and our theology is all firmly rooted the hard-won and faithful insights of the great thinkers of the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Europe.

And all those great 16th European Reformation thinkers like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, were dyed-in-the-wool Catholics, you know; passionate members and priests of the Roman church. And when they first started struggling in their hearts and thinking their great thoughts and challenging their church, they weren't trying to start new denominations or *new churches*, they were trying to alter (or re-form) what they regarded as the distorted, superstitious and even heretical practices of their mother church. But when she wouldn't budge, well, each in his own stubborn, limited but Spirit-filled way, determined to make a break with her.

Now clearly there's a lot to be said about all that...later. But the key revelation of the 16th century Reformers that I want to lift in the context of today's sermon is their assertion that no intermediary is required for a faithful relationship between God and a believer: not a church, not a priest, and certainly not some

human being that somebody somewhere regarded as a saint. On the contrary, in service to dismantling the manipulative and greedy practices of the corrupt hierarchy of the Catholic church at the time, much was made during the Reformation of the 'priesthood of *all* believers.'

So as far as the reformers were concerned, there was to be no more praying to St. Andrew for a husband, or St. Jude for an impossible cause, or St. Mary for ailing relationships, or 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.

Hadn't the First of the Commandments Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai read "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me?" Didn't God further elaborate that "Thou shalt not make for thyself, or bow down to, or worship, an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, nor on the earth beneath, nor in the water under the earth? And why was God so clear about this? Because "I the Lord your God am a jealous God." (Ex 20: 2-4)

Clearly for the Reformers, a break with the Catholic Church required a break with the Catholic pantheon of saints and the practices commonly accrued to their cult. And as a result, most of us growing up in Protestant traditions never learned much about the saints, never heard their stories, never pondered their special gifts, except maybe the ones superficially claimed by secular concerns like St. Valentine and St. Patrick. And for some reason neither understood nor questioned, when I was in high school in Buckhead, we exchanged St. Christopher medals when we wanted to go steady.

Still, you know, when you go to seminary and study the development of Christian thought over the centuries, you can't help but stumble across all kinds key, and canonized, holy ones. Now, given our reformed doctrine of the total depravity of humanity that says that before God, *all* humanity is *equally* sinful, we Presbyterians may not be as inclined to acknowledge or emphasize the catholic doctrine of the saintliness of the saints. But I maintain that the lives and witness of remarkable Christians in history still have much to teach followers of Jesus Christ, even those of us in our little reformed corner of the church universal.

For example, St. Augustine, the dark-skinned bishop of Hippo in Egypt, whose life story and brilliant insight earned him description as 'one of the great architects of Western thought.'¹ Or St. Gregory of Nyssa, who was "largely responsible for the formulation of orthodox teaching on the Trinity and the nature of Christ" we talked about on Trinity Sunday.² Or before Gregory and Augustine, St. Irenaeus, who was the first systematic theologian in the church, which means he made a stab at making everything about faith make a kind of sense.³ These were fervent Christian believers every one, whose personal faith and thoughtful revelation contributed mightily and essentially to the development of our faith today. Indeed, it was on the foundation of these brilliant minds that many 16th century reforms were based.

But the saints I personally like best are the spiritual mystics, the ones whom God blessed with intimate insight and revelation and divine relationship.

¹ Ellsberg, Robert, All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses For Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999. p. 370.

² Ibid., p. 109.

³ Ibid., p. 279.

And with the resurgence in recent decades of interest in Christian ‘spirituality,’ new attention is being paid even in the Protestant tradition to the leadership, insight and contributions of such remarkable figures as St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Lisieux, Brother Lawrence, Blessed Julian of Norwich. Seminaries across the nation, including our Columbia Seminary in Decatur, now offer degree and certificate programs rooted in the study of the lives and practices of these very personages whose lives and example continue to provide inspiration and guidance today. In fact, our own Libba Pendergrast is deep into the spirituality certification program at Columbia.

And then, of course, there are contemporary saints; not just those tapped by the Vatican, but the flesh-and-blood folks who comprise our personal list of holy ones - people in our church, or our families, or our histories, whose peace, or compassion, or faith, or generosity of spirit we admire and wish to emulate. Because that’s the *real* value of saints, isn’t it?, at least for us Protestants. Not someone to pray to but someone to imitate. Someone who models for us at least some of the qualities of a mature Christian life that we can then try and emulate.

Richard Rohr says about us human beings that ‘we are essentially imitative creatures. We cannot imagine it until we see it ‘in the real.’ (Those whom we regard as saints are), he says, fine lamps on a lamp stand for all of us to see – and catch the light. No theory here, only human lives in all their dignity.”⁴

Because, you know, the teachings of the gospel are tough. Look at today’s text in which Jesus announces that he has come not to bring peace but

the sword. No kidding. Setting men against their fathers, daughters against their mothers; opening our households to our enemies; taking our lives just when we think we've found them; urging us to take up the cross like he did. Jesus Christ, those are tough teachings. No love is tougher than divine love and who of us doesn't need friends and companions and encouragers and teachers along the path of discipleship. Which is how I regard many saints - as friends and teachers on the path of discipleship. And says Matthew in today's text, it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher. It's enough to *try* to imitate the holy ones. At least once in a while.

So whether it's one of the legendary greats of Christian history or somebody we've personally had the pleasure of knowing, saints are the friends and teachers who embody some aspect of what Jesus taught and modeled, offering us a proof, as written in today's Words of Preparation, that the gospel *can* be lived.'

'Cause truth is, you and I can *hear* about the gospel all we like. We can read scripture and listen to sermons and study in Sunday School and teach our children 'til we're blue in the face. But what really impresses us is not the flapping of lips or the pointing of fingers, or even the bending of knees. What *really* strikes home to us essentially imitative creatures is when we witness a life, or even a *moment* in a life, when actions speak louder than words. When the faithful actually *live* the gospel instead of just talking about it, now, *that* leaves an impression. And maybe opens the possibility for you and I to make a stab at living it ourselves.

⁴ Ibid., Quoted review of [All Saints](#), pre-Introduction.

So, don't worry; we're not talking here about stepping outside our tradition to venerate or worship the saints but about learning from their lives. Anyway, as the great 17th century Christian apologist Pascal observed, the veneration of the saints can easily pass over into a pious trivialization of their challenge. By putting saints on a pedestal, we imply that their example poses no personal challenge, that their lives have nothing to do with ordinary, everyday, run-of-the-mill Presbyterians like us, who, after all, hardly claim any saintly status ourselves.

'Fact, I got tickled last Sunday when after worship in the focus group we were debating the language for an identity statement for this church and Bennett piped up and allowed as how we should be sure to put something in there about us being broken, limited imperfect human beings here at this church. And I could just feel John Calvin smiling his blessing upon Bennett.

Because – and here's another corollary lesson about Reformed theology – not only do we Presbyterians avoid calling ourselves or anyone 'saints,' we don't even regard ourselves as sinners on a path to improvement! Cute, nice and pleasant as we are, our reformed theology insists that we're all really just plain old rock-bottom sinners whom God just keeps on forgiving anyhow. Our job is pretty much just to stay humble and say thanks, often. That, and to keep on growing up in the faith.

So, no, you and I don't aspire to be saints, or even saintly, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from the great and faithful Ones, many of whose stories issue a personal challenge, each in his or her own peculiar way.

One models compassion; another, self-sacrifice; another, wisdom; another, spiritual insight; another, a flaming passion for God. These folks don't just talk about it; they *are* it; 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 of how we are to be.

The book of Hebrews reads "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." (Hebrew 12:1)

In the coming weeks, we will explore together in worship the lives and teachings of particular members of the 'cloud of witnesses' that surrounds and sustains us, not so we can worship *them* for heaven's sake, but so that we might hear their stories, understand their circumstances, regard their challenges, and learn from their choices. And so, too, that we might gain hope and insight and inspiration from the testimony of their lives.

As Protestant Christians, what we're concerned with is not so much the authenticity of the miracles or facts surrounding the lives of saints as the enduring 'truths' revealed through their lives, the characteristics and qualities for which they were revered, the particular dimensions of the Christian life they exemplified. *That's* what we'll be looking for during this coming season of the church, as we shift our attention from what Jesus said and did, to how certain distinguished believers lived out his example.

Underlying this exploration is, of course, the question of how you and I are living out the gospel, and what can be learned from the saints and from one another about doing it better.

Robert Ellsberg, author of the book All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witness For Our Time, from which I draw heavily, remarks in his introduction that “in the minds of many people today the legends of the saints reflect an all too stereotypical pattern: They spent their lives in prayer and performing good works. Some of them were martyrs. Others founded religious orders. Others had visions or performed miracles.... All this may be true, but it tends to elide a good many issues. While there are recognizable patterns in the lives of the saints, each one was, says Ellsberg, in his or her own way an ‘original. ...Many of them struggled hard to invent a new style of Christian witness in response to the needs of their time.

“...Karl Rahner adds that ‘(the saints) are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for ...their particular age. They create a new style; prove that a certain form of life and activity is a ... genuine possibility...’ The saints are those who, in some practical way, embody – literally incarnate –the challenge of faith in their time and place.”⁵

As we listen to their stories in the coming weeks, let’s ask ourselves what creative models of holiness are right for our age. What new styles of Christianity, of Christian life and activity are genuinely possible in our time? As 21st century Christians, as PCUSA Presbyterians, as members and friends of Emory Presbyterian Church, in what practical ways are you and I called to embody the

challenge of Christian faith in our own time and place? Which patterns and practices of holiness still have the power to sustain us in our faith today? And in what ways, as 21st century followers of Jesus Christ, do we simply have to be...*original*?

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁵ Ibid., p.2.