

SLD06.03.07 Trinity Sunday and Intro to Saints
EPC
Romans 5:1-5
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Access to Grace – Our Summer Saints”

A couple weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost, the birthday of the church universal, which marks a sort of midpoint 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 – the time 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 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 seems 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 an opportunity to examine the lives of ordinary people who became extraordinary witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Several 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 an enormously rich heritage of examples of discipleship that we rarely plumb in the Protestant tradition - the lives of the Christian saints! Since then, I’ve made it something of a tradition each summer to pull together a list of admirable holy ones (which I get to do because we’re not beholden

to the Pope) and commence learning not only about their stories but what their lives and choices might teach us disciples today.

But each year before we launch into our “summer saints series,” I like us to review the reasons why we Christians of the Reformed tradition have not, historically, paid a great deal of attention to the saints.

That’s what we are, you know – us Presbyterians - Christians of the *Reformed tradition*. Our worship is *Reformed worship*, and our beliefs are grounded in *Reformed theology*. If you’re wondering where the “reformed” part comes from, it’s the great Protestant reformation in Europe in the 16th century.

And – here’s a history lesson - what was being “protested” in Europe in the 16th century (Protested. Protesters. Protestants. Get it?) was 16th century European Catholicism.

Keep in mind that the great 16th European Protestant Reformers, the founders of the Protestants churches like Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, all started out as dyed-in-the-wool Catholics. You know that, right? Our founders’ roots are in Catholicism. The Catholic church is our mother church, too. So much so that when the founders of the 16th century Protestant movement first started struggling in their hearts and thinking their great thoughts, they weren’t trying to start new denominations so much as they were attempting to alter (or re-form) what they had come to regard as the distorted, superstitious and even heretical practices of their beloved Catholic church. And among the practices that these Catholic reformers resisted was the enormous attention and economic investment poured into the Catholic cult of saints.

Now, it wasn't that Luther and Calvin and Zwingli didn't esteem these inspiring figures of Christian history. It's just that when people's esteem and reverence evolved into outright *worship* of the saints, that became anathema (or totally against) what these Catholic reformers understood to be four essential theological principles: Soli Deo Gloria, Mediator Dei, Justificatio, and Communion Sanctorum. That was another thing that miffed the reformers – they knew that nobody had any idea what the preachers were talking about.

So let me just tell you that “Soli Deo Gloria” means worship God alone. Pretty straightforward, right? Don't be worshipping anybody but God! Observing the popular piety of the late medieval cult of saints, scandalized 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. (as a result)...spoiled of his own virtue, Jesus Christ passed unnoticed among the crowd of saints, like one of the meanest of them.¹

Later Protestant divines were even more assertive in the Westminster Confession of Faith: 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.” (6.105)

The second principle (*mediator Dei*) reformers viewed as sullied by the worship of saints was that of Christ's unique role as Mediator between God and man. (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

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.

The third objection (justificatio) that early reformers registered was related to a popular belief that saints, having accumulated more merit than they needed for personal salvation, might, if you prayed to them effectively, share some of their surfeit merit with one's own flagging account. Well, this was altogether contrary to the reformers' view that salvation is by grace alone. Anyway, if anybody had any merit to spare, it'd be Jesus Christ, who already distributes it freely for the salvation of all.

Finally, reformed theologians balked at their mother church's notion of *communio sanctorum*, or the ranking of sins or degrees of holiness. To Luther and Calvin, all Christians were equally depraved before God, and all Christians equally justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8).³

In short, 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. Insofar as the reformers were concerned, all that praying to St. Andrew for a husband, or to St. Christopher for traveling mercies, or to St. Jude for impossible causes, had to stop. And for those of us growing up Protestant, it did. And as a result, we never learned a thing about the pantheon of saints, never heard their stories, and rarely pondered their special gifts or lessons for us today. Which is too bad.

Even as early as 1561, reformed theologian Henry Bullinger wrote in the II Helvetic Confession that:

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,

³ [Hungryhearts](#), p.2

to share eternal salvation with them, to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ...

... 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.⁴

“Saints,” however we define them, clearly have something to teach us. Yet, 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.”⁵

Fortunately, the liturgical renewal of recent decades in the Protestant tradition opened the way for more exploration of the people and practices and insights of the early church. Today, examining the lives of people who have lived the gospel in some inspiring way is okay, even encouraged. In fact, it’s generally acknowledged that studying remarkable disciples of Jesus not only provides a witness to the diversity of people through the ages who have been transfigured by the Holy Spirit, but teaches us about the variety of paths of discipleship available to us today.

So, we 21st century Protestants of the Reformed tradition are invited to turn to the lives of the saints with openness and enthusiasm, not to worship them, but to know them, to honor them, to understand our spiritual inheritance, and to seek clues for how to be faithful today. You and I don’t pray to saints, though we may learn through them new ways to pray. We don’t even aspire to *become* saints, accepting as we do, the fundamental limitations of our brokenness. Yet we keep striving to integrate our faith into our lives, don’t we?, and the example of the “saints” can help us do that. So we look to them for reflections of, and possibilities for, our own serpentine journeys of faith.

⁴ Book of Confessions, 5.026, 5.226 (II Helvetic Conf).

⁵ *Ibid.*

And what a spectrum of possibilities they offer! Some saints are mystics, and some are activists. Some work in and through the church, others are hermits and loners. Some are scholars; some, theologians; some, fools for Christ. Some boast extraordinary accomplishments, but most are ordinary, even prosaic, in their daily lives. And then, too, there are the flesh-and-blood folks who comprise our own personal list of holy ones – the people in our church, or our families, or our personal histories, whose peace, or compassion, or faith, or forgiveness, or generosity of spirit we admire and wish we could emulate.

The spectrum of saints we'll meet this summer includes Elijah, Agnes Church, Julian of Norwich, Caryll Houselander, Bede Griffiths, Edith Stein, Rufus Jones, Oscar Romero, Howard Thurman, the early women of the Church, and others. And what a diversity of riches they represent! One models compassion; another, self-sacrifice; another, wisdom. One somebody offers spiritual insight; another, courage; another political savvy, another simply understands the poor. Each, in their own way, is 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, or really, how we could be if we allowed the gospel to rule our imagination.

For that's is the *real* value of saints, isn't it, at least for us Protestants? Not someone to worship but someone to imagine, to imitate, to inspire. Not someone to revere but someone to befriend. Not someone to canonize, as if they were beyond us and totally "other," but someone with whom to identify and model our own spiritual lives. 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 someone who

simply moved our heart one day, to us Reformed Protestants, saints are really just guides and companions for our own journeys of faith, guides and companions whose lives offer proof that the gospel can, indeed, be lived.

To the glory of God. Amen.