

“All Saints” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey Nov. 2, 2008
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

TEXTS: Deuteronomy 34:1-8; Matthew 5:1-2

Several years ago, I was invited to the annual Memorial Day event at Vedanta, a Hindu meditation center at Point Reyes. Each year representatives from various religions are invited to talk about an assigned topic. That year the topic was women saints in each tradition.

When the Jewish Rabbi got up, he confessed his confusion. “This assignment was daunting. Woman saints are not part of my tradition. I got so desperate I resorted to Google. And the first entry my search yielded was Mary , Mother of Jesus!”

He went on to explain that the Jews really don’t have saints, at least not as commonly construed. Every one of the great Jewish teachers, prophets, heroes and heroines, are flawed. Some of the Bible's greatest stars were saints with crooked haloes. We honor Abraham as the father of the Hebrew people. Yet this same Abraham could be a cowardly, ignoble liar. He had a beautiful wife named Sarah. On two occasions when they traveled to a foreign country, he introduced his wife Sarah as his sister. He was afraid that if she was known to be his wife, other men would kill him in order to claim her. He was weak when it came to women. Yet, God took this man and made him the first building block of the nation of Israel, and, for that matter, founding father of Islam. A saint with a crooked halo.

Think about Moses, the liberator of the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery. Even at the age of 80, he was nothing but a once-upon-a-time prince turned outlaw. How amazing that God would choose such a man to be the George Washington of Israel, a wanted murderer whose picture was on all the post office walls of Egypt. But that's what God did, and Moses was equal to the task. A saint with a crooked halo.

Consider a woman named Rahab. She ran a house of ill-repute in Jericho's red-light district. Yet she was the key inside person in God's plan to overthrow Jericho. And, the gospel writer Matthew lists her as an ancestress of Jesus! Now, that's a saint with a crooked halo!

I think we need to change some of our ideas about sainthood. We tend to think of a saint as a person of enormous faith, incredible virtue, and unblemished moral record. But when the church was brand new, all Christians were called "saints." They were simply believers being re-made by the Christ-Spirit living within them.

Saints are those who accept God’s love, and who offer love in return. Saints are those who care. The saints, or in Greek, *hoi haggioi*, the holy ones, simply means, “the believers.” When Paul writes “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ,” he’s writing to everybody. It’s a mass mailing. “Dear Occupant.” “Dear Pew Sitter.”

“Dear Saint.” there’s no difference. Jesus adds to the description as people who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, who are peacemakers. who mourn, who are poor in spirit. And when he uses the Greek word *makarios* in the Beatitudes, it is most accurately translated as honored, or close to God-- Not “happy,” not “blessed,” not “fortunate,” but “close to God.”

The people honored in our opening litany and around our table today are people like that -- people who have lived in the love of God and who have done God’s work on this earth -- people who have loved God with all their heart and soul and mind – and their neighbors as themselves. “Love cures.” says Karl Menninger. “It cures not only those who receive it -- it cures those who give it.” “The love of our neighbor is the only door out of the dungeon of self” wrote George MacDonald. Saints know love, and know how to live in love, God’s love.

The saints we honor were builders. Whether building a family or a symphony or a healing ministry, each of them had a vision, a goal, and an inspiration. They moved toward the vision God set out.

This month we will be talking about stewardship in the context of building – our own building, the building of our beloved community, and building ourselves in the fruits of the spirit.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul says:” I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. For we are God’s fellow workers, you are God’s field, God’s building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it.”

And James writes, “Consider it pure joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance blessed is the man who preserves under trial because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love God.”

Again, Paul, in a letter to Timothy, notes God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power of love and of self discipline. And in Hebrews, Paul writes “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”

On this Day of the Dead, on this All Saints celebration, we honor those who have lived before, and who have lived in a way that inspires and guides us. And we sing a song of the saints of God and we say I mean to be one too.

Saints live on in their death. But they are honored because of their life. And they are not honored because they have completed some great work on earth, but because in faithfulness, they have walked with God. And in faithfulness, they have passed the

mantle on to us. As we consider the builders who have come before us, our cloud of witnesses, we must also consider the legacy they bequeath to us – to carry on this work, the work of building the beloved community.

Take a minute, now, and look around you. Look at the places in the congregation that were occupied by the saints who've gone before us. Then imagine all those names on our table, all those named in our liturgy; let your senses diffuse a bit and see if you can feel their tug on your lives. Ask yourself where they're tugging you. How do they want you to continue their work?

Perhaps the most renowned story of unfinished business recorded in the Bible is that of Moses reluctantly ascending Mount Nebo to stand, somewhat wearily, atop Pisgah. Spread out in front of him is the long sought land of promise.. Here, looking wistful and dismayed, like a starting pitcher in the bottom of the ninth when the bull pen is inexplicably summoned, he is at a loss for words entirely. It is Yahweh instead who does all the talking: "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there."

Far from being a punitive action, this appears to be a fond farewell, almost as if the Almighty is bestowing one final blessing upon the beloved servant: Well done, dear Moses, well done. Your work is now complete!

Moses, the stutterer, allows the Hebrews to become Jews by encouraging them to tell their own story. And when everything is said and done, that might have been the greatest gift he possibly could have given them: the self-confidence that, although setbacks will inevitably occur, they can now make it on their own by turning again toward God.

Ultimately, I suppose, that's the point of unfinished business: to make us realize anew how truly dependent we actually are upon our God. I mean, if we could achieve all that we set out to accomplish, if we could realize every aspiration and obtain each goal, what need would there be of a Sustainer, or for that matter, a Redeemer?

Indeed, it may well be that we are destined to dream of the unattainable from the very beginning, when the Creator first hid a pinch of eternity in a handful of clay. Perhaps it is by design that we forever strive to touch the very heaven from which our hearts were hewn. Not so much because we think it ever possible to take hold of God, but rather because, in lifting our arms, it then becomes possible for God to take hold of us!

The work of the saints is never done. It is up to each of us to carry on with the two great commandments, Love you God with all your heart and mind and strength and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. Then we too will be saints of God, in life and in death.

Amen