

From Possessing to Receiving!

All Saints Day

2011

Introduction: Today we are celebrating All Saints Day. “So what is a good definition of a saint, Pastor Mark?” This was the beautiful question posed to me by one of our confirmation students. I immediately thought of Luther who defined a saint as “a forgiven sinner.” What would you have told her? (Wait) In the New Testament the word is translated **Holy**. The saints are holy not because of something intrinsic to them rather holy because of the holy presence of Christ within them. A second more common way we use the word is as a hero or heroine in faith.

Image/Imitate: I thought it might be fun to look at all the hero’s of the Bible that we could imitate and I noticed among a number of the great men and women that they all had issues, for instance:

Abraham thought he was too old!

(Genesis 17:17)

Isaac was a liar, just like his Dad!

(Genesis 26:7, 20:2)

Jacob was a liar & a schemer!

(Genesis 27:19 and many more!)

Leah was plain (ugly?)!

(Genesis 29:17)

Joseph was abused!

(Genesis 37:18f and many more!)

Moses had a speech problem!

(Exodus 4:10)

Gideon was afraid!

(Judges 6:27)

Samson had long hair and was a

Womanizer!

(Judges 16:17, 14:2, 16:1)

Rehab was a prostitute!

(Joshua 2:1, 6:17)

Jeremiah and Timothy

Were too young!

(Jeremiah 1:6, 1 Timothy 4:12)

David was an adulterer and a murderer!

(2 Samuel 12:9)

Elijah was suicidal!

(1 Kings 19:4)

Isaiah preached naked!

(Isaiah 20:2-3)

Jonah ran from God!

(Jonah 1:3)

Naomi was a bitter widow!

(Ruth 1:20)

Job went bankrupt!

(Job 1:13-19)

Peter denied Christ!

(Matthew 26:69-74)

The Disciples fell asleep

While praying!

(Matthew 26:40-43)

Martha worried about everything!

(Luke 10:40-41)

The Samaritan woman was

Divorced, more than once!

(John 4:18)

Zaccheus was too small!

(Luke 19:3)

Paul was too religious!

(Philippians 3:4-6)

Timothy had an ulcer!

(1 Timothy 5:23)

AND

Lazarus was dead!

(John 11:1-44)

And each one is considered saintly. So what does it take?

There are good reasons on All Saints Day that we listen to the Beatitudes taught by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. As you listen for the next few moments remember one saint who feasts at the banquet of the Lord and one living saint who is presently mentoring your faith.

Indwelling: *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain and after he sat down, his disciples came to him, then he began to speak and taught them; saying: **Blessed!*** Jesus begins his teaching with what we have come to call the beatitudes or **the blessings**. Jesus is contrasting two ways to blessedness: The kingdom way of pure gift from God and the fleshy way of human achievement. One is a gift from Jesus the other is earning it on your own. The poor in spirit, those who mourn those who hunger and thirst, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those persecuted are the radical inversions of being blessed in God's order. All of these people are ordinary people thought to be unblessed and unbleisable and Jesus shows us there is something about life in the kingdom of God that makes them blessed. You may have a hard time wrapping your mind around Jesus' radical inversion in this first teaching from the mountain. For example take the first beatitude: (Blessed are the poor in spirit...) the phrase "**poor in spirit**" simply means "the poverty stricken in spiritual things..." - The simple minded, the untalented, the religiously unsophisticated. This is so contrary to our human way of thinking about what makes people well off that many English translators of the Bible cannot bring themselves to translate it directly. They will often add something to it which of course takes the sting out of the teaching. And what is it about the life in the kingdom of God that makes these unblessed and unbleisable people well off? It is the loving, accepting, affirming presence of Jesus Christ, who freely welcomes and receives, "**the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on,**" to use the words of Simon and Garfunkel. Now, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount has actually changed our minds on a number of categories today, such as **the merciful** or **the pure in heart** or **the peacemakers**, but they were not thought to be blessed in Jesus' day. And, frankly, even today when priorities of life are set, these types stand pretty low. Jesus seems to define a Saint as one who receives a gift from God.

Immediacy: "How would you translate blessing?" Jim Forest once asked the biblical scholar Rabbi Steven Schwarzchild. "There is no one word that will do," the rabbi replied. "It is something like 'on the right path,' 'on the way the Creator wants us to go.' It is the opposite of the word for sin, which means 'losing your way.'"

I would like to find a more authentic definition of blessing, so maybe we can do so by thinking what it is not...Dr. Rowan Williams the 104th Arch-Bishop of Canterbury and leader of the Anglican Communion noted that one of the main reasons for the world's financial problems since 2008 is **pride**: "*The view that somehow my concerns, simply because they're mine, take precedence over everyone else's. I ought to be capable of running my own world. I don't want to be dependent on anyone.*" (Disciplines, Upper Room Books, 2010 – p. 313) Pride is not in the saint's bag of traits. How many of you have ever said, "I am so proud of _____?" You can fill in the blank. I am proud of my child, my team, my work task

force, etc. Just last month at our guides huddle, after St. Martin's Lutheran confirmation youth and adults came to our program for a night, I said to our guides, "I am so proud of how you all contributed to the evening." That is pride. Pride is dangerous because when I use words like that – it is as if I possess the guides or program. So I have been trying to ban the words "pride" and "proud" from my vocabulary. And I am substituting "I am honored to be working with you." "I am blessed by my children." There is a saintly fundamental shift here from portraying ourselves as "possessing" something which is pride to "receiving" something which is being blessed or honored. Something very special happens when we do this, everything is seen then as a **gift!**

In the End: It is just plain exhausting trying to be blessed as a saint. If it is up to me, I would fall back into pride or thinking it is something I have to do. But Jesus tells us that sainthood is a gift of receiving what God wants for each one of us gathered here. It is not "mine" we cannot own it or possess it; we can only receive it! One of my dear friends gave me this card last Saturday and on the outside the message is written by Max Lucado who said: "Blessed are the available" listen to the front of the card: (Read).

At the end of Irmgard's funeral today we heard both saint and sinner, blessed and peace in these words:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant _____ . Acknowledge, we humbly you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light!

The saints we remember today did not achieve or accomplish their right to be a saint, rather in Christ the saint maker, God blessed them. We follow where Christ and saints lead, knowing all the while that we stumble and fall. My first impulse with that confirmation student was the correct one: a saint is a forgiven sinner. All the saints remind us that there is nothing we cannot do with Christ and the power of God who makes all things new and has the power to raise us from death to life! Thanks be to God for this indescribable title of one who is blessed. Amen.