

For All the Saints

Isaiah 25:6-9

John 11:32-44

We humans are a competitive lot. From the moment we are born our place in the world is measured against the person next to us. Were we above the 50th percentile in height and weight? Did we have as many words at a year old as cousin Johnnie did? What was our class standing when we graduated from high school? Have we advanced through the company faster than the people we started with all those years ago?

My cumulative GPA in high school – 3.00 – turned out to be a pretty fair predictor of the measure of the next 30 years of my life. Not a disgrace, but not exactly anything to brag about either. Just pretty average. Always right in the middle of the pack. I never disgraced myself, but I never distinguished myself either. I wasn't most likely to be or do anything. I've never been recognized for any achievements, never had an article or sermon or even a letter to the editor published. I did get a scholarship when I went to college, but not even the admissions guy could tell me what it was for. I vaguely remember him muttering something about having nice penmanship.

The whole idea of sainthood has that same effect on me that those awards ceremonies did back in school. I wouldn't go so far as to say it churns up feelings of inadequacy, but certainly feelings of unremarkableness. Now, I happen to know that most of you are well above average, but I wonder if, when it comes to sainthood, to our annual observance of the "who's who" of the Christian faith, the chances are good that you share my deep and abiding sense of humility. It's just very hard to break ourselves of the habit of comparing ourselves and our accomplishments to others to see just where we stand. Or in this case, to see how far we fall short.

If you were at the ConneX service last week you heard quotes from a variety of saints, ancient and modern, official and unofficial, people like Augustine, Theresa of Avila and Martin Luther King. People who will be long remembered for their writings and their lives; their wisdom, their incredible bravery, their vision, and most of all, their intimate relationship with God. We read about the incredible sacrifices they made, the dangers they faced, the battles they fought and the amazing grace with which they lived their lives. And we know that we are definitely below average. No one will write books about us. Our prayers and devotional journals will never be published. Our bravery will never be extolled or our gentleness and goodness proclaimed for generations to come. Our thoughts about God and the religious life will not become required reading for divinity students. We will never be a Billy Graham or a Dietrich Bonhoeffer or a Mother Teresa. If you are like me, in all honesty you would have to say that I could never embrace poverty or care for dying lepers. I could never take a vow of silence or pray for hours on end. I would never be able to stand up to injustice the way Martin Luther King did, or take on an evil leader, the way Bonhoeffer did. I'm not sure that I would die for what I believed.

Even your regular, everyday garden-variety saints, the modern Presbyterian sort, have that same effect on me. When I plan a funeral and I really look at someone's life and see just how remarkable and faithful and true they were, I sometimes have this vague worry in the back of my head that when my time comes whatever poor pastor has the duty to bury me will be at a loss for

something inspiring to say about me. *Well, she tried hard, he'll say, some days, anyway. But she was no Myra Slawson, that's for sure. She dozed off during her prayers. Meek, humble, poor in spirit and all those other beatitudes – well, those aren't the words most of us would use to describe her. And if Jesus had told her she had to sell everything she had to follow him that would have been the last he'd have seen of her. Maybe she tried, but she could have tried harder.*

But sainthood isn't a classification of Christian. Being a saint is not like being valedictorian or a Rhodes Scholar. They are not the gifted Christians, the above-average ones that are just cut out of a different cloth from the rest of us, and to compare ourselves to the saints is to miss the whole point of All Saints Day. It isn't a day to remember their greatness, and see what giant shadows we stand in, what large shoes we will never be able to fill. It isn't even meant to hold these faithful and courageous people up as a model for us – here's what I should be like. Here is what I should be doing. There is nothing sentimental or competitive about All Saints Day. No one, least of all God, is asking us to be just like them.

Many of these people left us their words, volumes and volumes of them in some cases – their thoughts, their prayers, accounts of their encounters with God, even their struggles. But if we could ask them to tell us the one thing we needed to know, what the “secret” was to their extraordinary lives and faithfulness, I suspect that their answer wouldn't have anything to do with bravery or wisdom or devoting a certain number of hours a day to prayer and study. I suspect that they would say it would all boil down to this: love God, and trust God. Love God more than anything else in the whole world, more than anything else in your life. And trust that God will take care of all the rest.

Now, there's a good chance that what you mean by “take care of you” and what God means by “take care of you” isn't the same thing at all. God's not going to do the job the same way you would. He'll lead you to some pretty surprising and maybe even uncomfortable places. Maybe God will call you to some far off and exotic place to work in a difficult setting, or to confront some evil or injustice head on, even at the risk of your own life. But even if God's plans for you are no more dangerous or exotic than to be a plumber or an insurance agent, the life of a disciple will still be full of risk and adventure and discomfort –

Because what I have will always belong to God first.

Because looking after the needs of people will always come before my own leisure.

Because defending myself against the attacks of others will never be as important as being a person of peace, a peacemaker.

That's what being a disciple, a saint, is all about – going where God wants you to go, doing what God wants you to do, and trusting that all will be okay. Even if you are living very simply or just scraping by. Even if you find yourself ministering to orphans in a ghetto. Even if your life is threatened.

If All Saints Day says anything to us, it says that sainthood is forged in fire. It's easy to devote yourself to God and be a wonderful person when the world is treating you well, when your storehouses are full and you are admired by everyone you meet. It's when you aren't completely in control of your life and your destiny and your future that you learn what it means to trust God,

to put yourself completely in God's hands. It's when you are about the tough tasks of discipleship, loving your enemies, taking care of the lepers and the oppressed that you begin to understand what Jesus meant about servanthood and taking up your cross.

It was purely by accident that stewardship dedication was planned for All Saints' Day, but it was a happy coincidence. Or maybe a providential moment. This week they announced that the recession is officially over, but times are still tough. Our retirement coffers are coming back, but they're coming back slowly. And now the church wants our commitment for next year. God wants our commitment. Our first fruits. Not what we think will be left over, but our first and our best. God wants us to live dangerously, even more dangerously than we think we already are. The question isn't "can we afford it," but, "will we trust God?"

The Table is set for us, the saints of God. In our invitation to the Lord's Table we say that it is open to all who trust in our savior, Jesus Christ, because the truth is that it is only by his good pleasure that we are made saints, not by anything we do, not even by how well we live. Only by our trust in him. Will you put yourself in his hands, no matter what he asks, no matter where he sends?