

All Saints' Sunday

St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver
The Rev. Ruth Woodliff-Stanley
November 2, 2014

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

“I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true. Who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. And one was a doctor and one was a queen and one was a shepherdess on the green; they were all of them saints of God—and I mean, God helping, to be one too.

Therein begins one of my favorite hymns from childhood about saints. We're going to sing two verses from it in a few minutes.

What is a saint? Who is a saint? In The Episcopal Church, we must go through two General Conventions no less than fifty years after the death of an individual, engage hearings from proponents of this person's candidacy for sainthood, have a trial period of their inclusion in our list for three years, and finally vote to have them listed, permanently, as saints in our tradition in our official saints' calendar called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*.

Many people have inspired us from this official list, to be sure. And I'm glad we have it. But...it's also true that most of the saints in my life will never be considered in that process. And I suspect if they were, a number of them wouldn't make it through with flying colors. And God knows I'd never make it either. You know too much about me that you'd have to tell.

The saints most of us owe our lives and sometimes our souls to are what you might call *unofficial* saints. While the official saints were all human, we don't get to hear that side. But the saints we know personally are dear to us, often *because* of the things that many consider un-saintly.

They cuss; they rail against the night; they've been known to have a smoke or a drink...they argue, they cry inconsolably at times. They fall on their faces then repent and begin again. They are quirky and odd, doggedly persistent, accomplished in often unseen ways. They laugh themselves silly and dance like Elaine on Seinfeld. They are smart, sometimes brilliant even, and often skeptics. Rarely do they have all the answers. But they are wise. A wisdom that comes only by life, by the ways life can impoverish the spirit. Who is it who haunts you with their searing honesty, even as they love you so closely? These ones are likely your saints.

In the gospel reading we heard, Jesus blesses those who are poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, those who make peace. These are ones who have discovered what matters most. They have let themselves see their own poverty unmasked and have found in it a meeting ground where they can join unlikely companions who are looking for God amid the harshness of life, just as they are.

The beatitudes are Jesus' description of happiness. He is inviting, with these blessings, an awakening. He wants his hearers to see what really matters in a person's life. He is inviting the creation of a new community, one rooted chiefly in mercy.

Mercy is a kind of space we give to someone even and especially when we believe them to be undeserving. It is a space born of the knowledge of our own sinfulness and wounds. Seeing the poverty in our own spirits, we are humbled and thus opened. We are then able to honor the same poverty in our neighbor.

Mercy requires patience. Mercy can restore a person's honor.

The saints in my life are those who have treated me as beloved, highly honored, not because of my status or accomplishments but because they look at me through eyes of unfathomable mercy. And I mean that word—unfathomable. The saints in my life see things in me I cannot see in myself. And, they teach me to see those same things in others—to see God where I would see shortcomings. To see where a person is growing, is trying, is struggling and needing not my judgment but my mercy, my support, my strength.

A true spiritual family is marked by the discipline of extending mercy to those who challenge you.

Today, we are baptizing Lila Marjean. Through baptism, we are inviting her to join us in practicing mercy. Baptism asks this of us. It is the sacrament that draws us from the individual's journey to the community's journey. Baptism is a ritual in which you and I commit to seeking Christ's face in the faces of family and friends as well as strangers, odd ducks, and enemies.

And when we have eyes to see others that way, we are changed. We become more capable of changing the world. We are less tyrannized by our own insecurities and need to judge others. Our thinking matures; our hearts grow. We become saints.

My childhood favorite hymn about saints concludes with these words:

“You can meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea. For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.

I invite you to give thanks for the unofficial saints in your life. Who are they? Call them to mind. Acknowledge them. Remember their poverty of spirit, their hard earned wisdom, their peculiarities, their inimitable traits. Not perfect people. But merciful people. People who have looked at *you* with unfathomable mercy. People who inspire you to look at others in the same way.

Honor these unofficial saints today. You know who they are. They need no vote from General Convention, no hearings on their qualifications. Their qualifications are written on your heart forever.

Bless God for them. Give yourself to the same mercy you have heard and seen in them. Be the saint God needs you to be.

Now, we will pray aloud the names of saints who have left us during the past year. May their mercy become ours. For there's not any reason, no not the least, why we shouldn't be saints too. AMEN.