

## **ALL SAINTS DAY, YEAR B, NOVEMBER 3, 2024**

Who are the saints in your life? I don't mean people who have lived exemplary lives but rather those people who inspired, consoled, cajoled you at different points in your life. Are they family members, friends, workers, teachers? Who is it that you could turn to or rely on in moments of despair and in moments of joy? These people are the true saints no matter what their belief system is or isn't for they were the ones who stood by you when you most needed it.

If you look at the people who have inspired you the one fact that makes them a saint is their life's struggles that enabled them to reach out to others to offer an encouraging word of hope and to show true faith, strength and courage by how they lived their lives.

This is true about 11 women who were ordained in Philadelphia, Pa, July 29, 1974 by three retired bishops that set off a firestorm within the Episcopal Church. These women were already ordained as deaconesses in the Episcopal Church and were serving in the highest ecclesiastic order women could aspire too at that time.

Believe it or not it wasn't until 1970 that women were allowed to be delegates to the General Convention of our church that decides on a host of issues like prayer book revisions, etc. It was at that convention that the canonical distinction between a deacon and deaconess was eliminated making both males and females deacons. This meant women were now eligible to be priests which presented the church with the issue of whether to ordain women as priests and bishops too.

At the following General Convention in 1973 the resolution to admit women as priests was defeated due to a parliamentary technicality. Many of the female deacons started working on getting the legislature passed for 1976 while others said enough is enough it is time for us to be priests. So on that fateful day 50 years ago eleven of those deacons presented themselves to be ordained at Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia an historic black congregation who welcomed them with open arms. Over 2000 people were in attendance including Barbara Harris who served as the crucifer that day and would later become the first female bishop in 1988.

Two weeks after the ordinations the House of Bishops convened an emergency meeting and attempted to say the ordinations were invalid but realized that was not possible so declared they were irregularly ordained. Two months later the House of Bishops endorsed in principle the ordination of women to the priesthood but cautioned everyone to wait until the 1976 General Convention before ordaining any more women. However, the newly ordained women priests were ordered not to celebrate Eucharist.

Several of them defied that order and for the first time two women Episcopal priests celebrated the Eucharist at Riverside Church in NYC a non Episcopal Church. Subsequently, two male priests allowed a few women to celebrate the Eucharist in their respective Episcopal churches. Those two male priest were brought up on disciplinary charges and convicted of disobeying a "godly admonition" from the bishops.

In 1975 four more women were ordained. Finally in 1976 at the General Convention both the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops approved the resolution to allow female deacons to be ordained priests. By the way the retired bishops that had presided at those ordinations were only censured by the House of Bishops.

When I look back at the many struggles that these women faced it is no different than many others have endured that we have designated as saints. These women were driven by their faith, their strong belief in the Holy Spirit that guided them. Too often the church has often led with blindness in their treatment of Native Americans, African Americans, LGBTQ+ and women to name just a few. It is spiritual blindness that often leads us to deny what God calls us to affirm.

What God calls us to affirm is taking Jesus' teachings to heart. The history of the Christian faith is also a history of people who have loved mercy, justice and peace so much they have been willing to be condemned, ostracized even die for those things. It has been the history of people who have given shelter to the poor, worked to free slaves, treated women as equal to men, treated those who have been scapegoated for whatever nonsensical reason with justice and dignity – in short, people who have believed that God created everyone and everything and are willing to treat all of their sisters and brothers as members of God's beloved family. People who not only believe God is inclusive but do everything in their power to include all of God's children no matter what their race, nationality, gender, religion, sexuality, social status, or political affiliation is.

We should always be asking the question, "Am I growing, Am I moving into who God has called me to be for my own sake as well as for the sake of the world? Am I growing more and more in what Jesus teaches me to do? Am I following Jesus' teachings in my life? Now more than ever our lives need to be centered around the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus to inform us and help lead us in our decision making.

We know it isn't easy to put Christ first and to live fully into making his teachings about mercy, love, justice, and peace our priority. Unfortunately, there are a lot of Christians who question Jesus' teachings. About a year ago some evangelical pastors told the magazine Christianity Today that when they would preach on the Sermon on the Mount, especially about helping the poor and "turning the other cheek," someone would come up after the service and ask, "Where did you get those liberal talking points?"

"What was alarming to them is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ,' the response would not be, 'I'm sorry.' The response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak,'" When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as weak and subversive and doesn't align with our social and political views or those views take precedence over Jesus' teachings then we're in a crisis."

There is nothing weak about Jesus' teachings. In fact, they take great strength and courage to live by them. It isn't easy to love our enemies or do good to those who hate us or pray for those who abuse us." It takes strength to help the poor, show mercy, want peace, and stand for justice for everyone.

We are called to remember Jesus' words, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' When we take these teachings to heart we are taking seriously what it means to live as a Christian putting Christ's teachings first and foremost in our lives. Just as Lazarus' was unbound from his grave clothes, so too we need to be unbound from those things that keep us from living our intended God filled lives.

So you see, to be a saint we only have to be willing to climb down into life with Jesus where the needs of the world are great and the realities of mercy and justice are often distorted and misunderstood. Because being a saint is not about holiness it's about becoming infused with the life of God, and offering that life for others in the name of Christ. Being a saint is being a person with a passion to make a difference in a world in need of love and mercy. Being a saint is being someone who holds as precious that which the world considers worthless or useless. Being a saint is becoming a person whose purpose is to face in two directions: to face Christ in faith, and to face our neighbor in love. Amen.