

## ALL SAINTS DAY, YEAR B, NOVEMBER 7, 2021

There were once two brothers who were well known in a small town who were involved in corruption, deceit, and organized crime. Both had accumulated a lot of wealth with their dishonest means. One day, one of the brothers died, and the other brother wanted a very nice funeral service for him. So, the rich man offered to pay the pastor of a small church \$50,000 if he would do the funeral service for his brother. There was only one condition: the pastor had to say that the rich man's deceased brother was a saint. After some prayer and reflection the pastor agreed to do the service. He figured this man had been so selfish and devious in his life only thinking of himself that he would use the money to fund the local food pantry and shelter. The pastor, however, also had one condition. The \$50,000 had to be paid in advance. The rich man and the pastor agreed to these conditions.

On the day of the funeral, the pastor had second thoughts about how he could keep his own integrity intact while calling a person a saint who had done so many despicable things in his life. When the pastor began the homily he started slowly, but then step by step launched into a litany of the horrible things the deceased man had done, how he had been selfish, greedy, corrupt, caring about no one but himself and on and on. He didn't cut the man any slack, and the congregants nodded their heads in agreement as the brutish nature of the dead man was recounted. Well, as you can imagine, the rich brother was getting a bit hot under the collar about the pastor not fulfilling his promise. Finally, the pastor said: "Now, brothers and sisters, we're all well aware of the character of this man we have gathered today to bury, and no one can rightly say he was anything less than a dishonest rotten scoundrel. Even so," the pastor concluded, "compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

The Greek word translated 'saint' in the Scripture means 'set apart.' Nowhere in Scripture is it implied that the title is earned or merited. Instead, it is given to those whom God has called to service. Oftentimes, we think in terms of saintliness as if it were unobtainable – beyond our reach. Yet everyone is set apart for service, which is to say, that everyone who does the work of God is 'saintly' and set apart.

I would like you to think for a moment those people in your lives who have meant something to you whether because they taught you something, did something for you or was a role model. I remember my second grade teacher Lenore Braun. She was also my kindergarten teacher at the religious private school I attended. About halfway through the second grade Miss Braun was let go. To this day I really don't know the reason she was let go except my mother once said it was because her belief system didn't quite measure up to the standards of the Christian Reformed Church which ran the school I went too.

What I do remember about Miss Braun was she was a gentle, loving, caring woman who after she left sent everyone of us that was in her class a Christmas, Easter and Birthday card every year as long as she had your address. I always sent Miss Braun cards too and little notes and I remember simple gifts from her like a New Testament or a crocheted cross that she would send along with a note telling me what was happening in her life. She continued to teach until her retirement and then took care of her ailing parents. We exchanged cards up until her death. But the last time I saw her meant the world to me because Miss Braun attended my ordination and words will never be able

express how honored I was that she came. But what I remember most about her was her quiet ways and her deep faith that resonated in the notes she would write to me. She truly was a saint for all that she did.

Ultimately, to be a saint means to respond: To live and grow in the faith – a faith in which Christ summons us to service and sacrifice. That summons includes being merciful and striving for justice and peacemaking. Exercising these virtues means that we dedicate our lives to God. This does require courage, because showing mercy or doing what is right is not always popular.

In other words, living into saintliness means an inevitable life of being slightly out of kilter with the world. For if we pursue to express the mind of Christ in everything we do means there will be clashes. It means not being conformed to the world but being transformed by the spirit.

The history of the Christian faith is a history of people who love mercy, justice and peace so much they have been willing to 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 – 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, gender, religion or sexuality is.

Throughout this adventure of faith the question should always be "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. Can others see through my words and actions that I am growing with God and that I'm living into my saintliness?"

Someone was said, "Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people; Before you tell me how much you love your God, show me how much you love all God's children; Before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors. In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give."

Saints are people who routinely give of their time to feed the hungry or visit the sick, those who get involved, even in a small way, when they see injustice in our social and political systems. They are the people who work to produce goods and services that sustain our lives and try to do that in a way that respects the earth as God's precious creation. They are the people who take time to mentor a child or to mourn with the bereaved. They are the nameless people who work for what is right and good and fair for all people, rather than just for themselves or the people most like them. They are people who have faults, who nag and fight, get angry, get depressed and have a multitude of problems. The saints of God are among us and touch our lives every day.

During this service we will remember in thanksgiving those who have made it possible for us to come this far in our journey through life and journey of faith. We remember our brothers and sisters, mothers and dads, grandpas and grandmas, little ones and aged, all who have died. Our lives were enriched by their encouraging us, inspiring us, entertaining us, celebrating with us, crying with us. Some have touched us directly and some indirectly. But we give thanks for their gifts of love, life, faith and courage. Just like them we are hopefully aware of our frailties as human beings, but also aware of our potential as followers of Christ.

So let us go out and seek to be living saints in a world that needs our love, and God's love, so very much. For all the saints, living and dead, for those we remember today and miss, for we who are living today, let us be the saints we are called to be. Amen.