

“You’re a Saint!”
A Sermon Preached by
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St. Matthew’s Church, Belleville
All Saints Sunday 2008

Scripture: Job 19: 23-27

I heard a story the last time I was back visiting my family overseas of a local priest walked into a pub in County Mayo and said to the first man he met, “Do you want to go to heaven and meet all the saints?” The man replied, “I do Father.” The priest said, “Okay, stand over there against the wall.”

Then the priest asked a second man, “Do you want to go to heaven and meet all the saints?” “Certainly, Father,” the man replied. “Good. Then stand over there against the wall,” said the priest.

Then the priest walked up to a third man from the parish and said, “Do you want to go to heaven and meet all the saints?” “No Father, I don’t.”

Shocked the priest said to the man, “I don’t believe this. You mean to tell me that when you die you don’t want to go to heaven?”

The startled man replied, “Oh yes, Father, when I die. I thought you were getting a little group together to go right now.”

One of the things you’ll notice if you spend a little time in the Catholic church is they seem to place greater emphasis on saints than we do in the Protestant or Reformed tradition. There are Saint days and feast days to celebrate the lives of the those particular Christians canonized in the Catholic Church. Of course, we too recognize the contribution of the famous saints to a lesser degree in The United Church of Canada.

Take our congregation, for example. We are named after St. Matthew. Matthew is one of those famous saints. Matthew, son of Alpheus, (believed by some to be known as Levi in the other synoptic gospels) was called by Jesus to abandon his profession as a tax collector (an unscrupulous profession in Jesus' day that in no way reflects on the fine folks in our congregation who work for Revenue Canada!) and become a disciple. Matthew wrote the first gospel in Aramaic, likely from Antioch of Syria, for a primarily urban Jewish audience and his community later edited the gospel closer to the version of the first book of the New Testament we now have today. Legend has it that Matthew was martyred for the faith in either Ethiopia or Persia. Today he is recognized as the patron saint of bankers and bookkeepers and the Roman Catholic Church celebrates his feast day on September 21st.

Of course, there are many, many lesser known saints and it's fun sometimes to flip through those dictionary of saints books out there. There are patron saints for everything from cab drivers to people suffering from headaches. I even discovered this week that St. Hubert is the patron saint of hunting after he saw the sign of the cross while on a hunting trip. I guess that explains the chicken restaurant chain in Quebec.

And yet, with all these stories of famous saints floating out there it does give the impression that one has to be extra-ordinary, super human, if you will, to be called a saint. Indeed, in the church we often turn to our elders with a real expectation for wisdom.

This reminds me of the sisters sitting around in the convent a hundred years ago who were all trying to out do each other for sainthood. One elderly nun in her 90s was suffering badly from arthritis and the doctor suggested that she be prescribed a shot of whiskey three times a day to relax her.

The old nun resisted, however, fearing this indulgence might cost her sainthood. The compassionate Mother Superior, however, knew the elderly sister loved milk. So she instructed the kitchen to spike her milk three times a day.

Eventually, the pious nun approached her final hour. As several sisters gathered around her bedside, they all quietly discussed the possibility of her sainthood and asked her for some parting wisdom before she died.

“Yes,” the elderly nun replied, “never sell that cow.”

The traditional Protestant push back on this one (and why Reformation Sunday competes with All Saints) is to claim back the designation “saint” for the whole people of God. If you flip through your Bibles you’ll find that there are over 60 references to saints with a pretty even split between the Old and New Testament. Saints were not a category of perfect people, rather, they were understood to be a group of folks who belonged to God. It was one’s relationship with God that brought with it the designation of saint.

The origin of All Saints day dates back to the reign of Pope Boniface IV (608-615) when he refurbished an old Roman temple which pagan Rome called the “all gods” temple (dedicated to the pantheon) and made it a church instead dedicated to “All Martyrs” of the Christian faith on May 13, 610. About a hundred years later Pope Gregory III (731-741) consecrated a new chapel in the basilica of St. Peter to All Saints (not just martyrs) on November 1st and thus began the tradition of remember all those faithful who were in relationship with God.

As a result of the reformation Protestant churches, for the most part, turned away from the celebration of the famous saints choosing instead to recast the word in its more biblical sense of a saint being simply one who belonged to God through the church. In our rush, however, the baby may have gone out with the bathwater. Since the Catholic’s have a key theological understanding connected to the saints known as the beatific vision. The beatific vision is an understanding that the gift of the saints is that they finally get to see God face to face. This confidence in seeing God face to face is what indicates one is living as a saint in the world.

This becomes very clear in today's reading from Job. If you know anything about Job you'll recall that it is a story of suffering. Not just suffering, however, but an innocent man who suffers while his friends try and figure out what he has done wrong to deserve the suffering. Meanwhile, the innocent, suffering Job repels his "so called friends" attacks while launching his own protest and fight for justice against God. This ancient story, which some suggest is one of the oldest parts of the Bible, has this famous section in Chapter 19 that we hear every Christmas in Handel's Messiah. Despite his suffering, despite his friend's lack of compassion, despite his unanswered questions regarding suffering, theology and humanity, Job makes this bold declaration that he trusts that his Redeemer lives and at the last will stand upon the earth. Job trusts that one day he will see God face to face and God will be on his side. Job trusts that he belongs to God, despite all the pain and suffering of this world. Job illustrates that one's life is full of purpose and meaning and should be spent speaking and seeking truth in this life. Imagine having the confidence that in the end one will see God face to face. This is the stuff that saints are made of.

On this All Saints Day I would like you to reflect on all the saints you've experience in your life. No, not the ones in the big dictionary of saints. I am thinking about all those people in your past. Parents, Grandparents, siblings, spouses, children, grandchildren, friends, co-workers, ministers, Sunday School teachers...on and on...who have faced life with faith and confidence that they belonged to God and in so doing modeled what the Bible would call the life of a saint. Not someone who is perfect but only one who is perfected by the grace and love of God.

Who are those saints in your life and history of faith? You will find a small slip of paper in the bulletin this morning with an opportunity for you to write down the name of the saint or saints in your past. When our sermon time is done in a moment you will have an opportunity to write that name on the sheet while Sherry plays some music for reflection. Then, giving thanks to God and remembering all those that have passed over to the other side we will sing "Shall we gather at the river." While the congregation as a whole will remain seated I encourage as many of you as feel called by the Spirit to bring your slip of

paper up here to the front. Take a pin and pin that slip to this mural that has the beautiful stained glass picture of St. Matthew with the words from the book of Job below... “I know my Redeemer liveth.”

By the end of the hymn I hope we have a beautiful visual of those saints held in our common memory here today. Remembering all those saints from our past, surrounding us like a cloud of witnesses here today, should inspire us to claim boldly the title of saint for ourselves. By doing so you are not making the claim that you are perfect, rather you are confessing that you belong to God and you trust that through Christ you can be perfected by His grace in this life and in the life to come.

Through your life and work here at St. Matthew’s I believe that:

No matter what your doubts

You’re a Saint!

No matter what others say

You’re a Saint!

No matter what the future holds

You’re a Saint!

And when the Saints gather at the river...and you see God face to face...you too will say with confidence and joy...I know my Redeemer liveth...thanks be to God. Amen.