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Be a Saint!

First Thessalonians is one of the oldest of all Christian documents. Paul is writing to the church at Thessalonica some thirty to forty years after the death of Christ, a body of people who are trying to live faithful lives together. The letter predates all four gospels and may well be the earliest of Paul's writing to appear in the New Testament. Paul offers a word of hope to the grieving, a reminder that a morning will come when the trumpet will sound, and at the cry of God's command, the dead in Christ will rise to be with God forever. And then Paul writes, "encourage each other with these words." Today is All Saints Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate the lives of the saints, those still living, and those who have died in Christ.

A friend of mine likes to tell the story of a tightly contested race for the US Senate back in 1948. A group of campaign workers for Lyndon Baines Johnson found support from some new voters – who were already dead. Johnson and his aides were out one night, illegally registering voters in a cemetery, when they came upon a worn tombstone, moss had grown up around the grave; the name was barely readable. The worker at the stone took a quick look and then moved on to the next. The leader of the expedition called out: "No, no, no, go back and register that person. He has as much right to vote as anyone else in this cemetery!"¹

Christians believe in the communion of the Saints, a belief that says the dead who are now with God have a right to vote. Or rather they cast their vote with the way they lived. They have cast their lot with God, and in the lives of the saints we know the love of God more clearly.

On All Saints day we remember those who have gone on to be with God, from the extraordinary saints of the church – St. Francis, Mother Theresa, St. Augustine, John Paul the second, Rosa Parks – to the more common though no less loved and cherished – your third grade Sunday school teacher, your parents perhaps, my grandmother, the pastor who baptized you, a dear friend now gone – all saints, who lived their lives in service to Christ and now rest from their labors. On all Saints day we remember and we mourn. Last Sunday afternoon we had a memorial service for Tyler Brown, the Duke Engineering student who died in a car accident over spring break. In her reflection on Tyler's life, Kristina Johnson, dean of the Engineering school, remarked: "The best tribute to a well-lived life is to imitate its goodness." Saints are important because in them we see the goodness of God, and with their lives they vote for that goodness, they call us to imitate that goodness.

And so, All Saints day is not only a day to mourn and remember, it is also a day to celebrate, to give thanks for what God has done through and with God's people. Saints are not only those who have already died in Christ, on all saints day we celebrate the saints of the here and now, the living breathing saints in our very midst who also cast

¹ I heard Dr. James Howell tell this story. A record of it can be found in Dr. Howell's new book, *The Life We Claim: The Apostles' Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship*, from Abingdon Press..

their vote for God. To be around a saint is to be in the presence of a human icon, a prism through which the light of God's love shines through in beautiful ways. Today, inspired by the great cloud of saintly witnesses who have gone on to be with God, and the saints among us now who testify of God's love with their lives, I want to say three things about what it might mean to be a saint.

First, Saints are different than most of us because they pursue God with a reckless abandon. Saints don't get their lives planned out and organized, and then say, "now how can I figure out a way to squeeze God in to my carefully choreographed desires?" Saints know what the rest of us forget. God doesn't desire the parts of our life that are left over after we have taken care of everything else. God doesn't desire the few bucks in our wallet after we have spent the rest fulfilling our own wants, or the couple of hours left in our schedule after we've ticked off our to-do list. Saints know that God wants every part of who we are, our hopes, our dreams, our careers, our relationships, our task list, our wallets, God wants all of it. Saints don't read the bible, like many of us do, as an intellectual puzzle to be solved in discussion groups. Saints read the bible as if were to be acted out, performed in their daily living, as if the bible were the score of a great musical and they were playing the leading role. A student who is exploring his own faith in Christ said over lunch this week, "I love to be around other students who are passionate about God, because they make me want to be passionate about God." We might call those passionate people, saints. Mother Theresa was asked once, "Why are you so holy?" To which she responded, "you act as if holiness is abnormal. It is normal for Christians to be holy. It is abnormal to be anything else." Saints are people of passion who live lives of holiness because it is normal.

Second, we need help to live saintly lives. We cannot do it alone. No one can jump from mediocrity to excellence in a flash; no one becomes Mother Theresa overnight. Even Rosa Parks didn't randomly decide to sit down on a bus and not get up. She had been preparing, not for that particular act necessarily, but to live more courageously. She was part of a church family that loved one another, encouraged one another, and saw in each other the dignity of God that could not be moved, that gave her the strength to keep her seat that day in 1954. To be a saint, we need practice, people to imitate, friends to help us live more saintly lives.

We don't only have to look to the usual suspects, the Mother Therasas, the Martin Luther King, Jr., the Desmond Tutus, who seem so far beyond us as our only models of saintly living. Saints are all around us. Think about the pictures that decorate your home or dorm room. Who is in those pictures? Maybe they are friends or family members, perhaps many are still living while some have died. When you look at them encased in their picture frames, aren't they also looking back at you? Don't they become icons of sorts? And when they look back at you, what are they saying to you about the way they live their lives, and the way we live ours? Don't they function the same way that the figures in the stained glass windows function here in the Chapel, peering in at us, encouraging us with lives well lived? When you look at the picture of your grandmother how does she mediate the goodness of God? Is it her gentleness? Or her selflessness? Maybe it's her devotion to family or her engagement in the community? What part of her goodness, her saintliness, can you imitate? When you look at those pictures of your friends on facebook.com – or in a regular old photo album, so 20th century – how do those friends remind you of God? Does one love you regardless of that embarrassingly

foolish evening sophomore year? Does another offer you a listening ear when you are lonely? Does a third care passionately about the poor and serve as a constant reminder of the social injustices in the world? Does she ask what you are going to do about it? If you aren't ready to take off for the slums of Calcutta and imitate Mother Theresa quite yet, can you imitate the best of those whom you love? Can you help your friends imitate the best of who you are? In that way, can we together live more saintly, more Christ-like lives?

The third thing about saintly living is that we start from the end of our lives, not from the beginning. We imagine the kind of person we want to be, and then work to get there. When people come to the end of their lives they never say, "I wish I had spent more time in the library as an undergrad," or "I wish I had gone into the office an hour earlier each day," or "If only I had spent more time paying attention to the stock market . . ." Or, "I should not have worked so hard at being a loving parent, or a good friend." No, on their deathbeds people say, "I wish I had been more attentive to my children. I wish I had been a more loving spouse." "I should have been less selfish, I could have made a bigger difference with my life." In other words, "I could have been more saintly."

I started this sermon by saying for Christians, we believe the dead have the right to vote, and we can learn from the dead about how to live our lives now. I want to conclude with two images of people who have come to the end of their lives.

First, we would be wise to listen closely to the old whiskey priest in Graham Green's *The Power and the Glory*, he comes to the last morning of his life, and says this: "What an impossible fellow I am . . . I have done nothing for anybody. I might just as well have never lived." And then Greene says of the priest, "He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted – to be a saint."

Contrast the emptiness of that image with the hope of this one.

In all of theatre, one closing scene may trump the rest. That is the end to Victor Hugo's classic *Les Miserable*, that story of grace, love, and redemption. In the final scene, a dying Jean Valjean is surrounded by Fantine and Eponine, two characters who died earlier in the story. Valjean is at the end of his life, someone who amidst the horror of the French Revolution, tried to do what was right and holy, especially to Fantine and Eponine, the two saints that are with him at the end. On the stage together, they begin to sing: "Take my hand and lead me to salvation. Take my love, for love is everlasting. And remember, the truth that once was spoken. To love another person is to see the face of God."

In their lives, in their love, the saints show us the face of God. Whether we are 18 or 99, there will come a morning when our earthly lives are no more. And when we hear the trumpet sound and the archangel's call and we stand before Christ face to face, there is only one thing that will count . . . did we do our best to be a saint.