

Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 4, 2012

Saints! I don't know about you, but I sometimes find them a little intimidating. They're just so, I don't know, SAINTLY! We might like the idea of saints, but they seem otherworldly, and they do things that sometimes make little sense to us.

Think about some of the famous saints. Imagine living with St Francis, who wouldn't let you use an ant trap in case it would hurt the poor little beasties. What would it have been like to live with St. Benedict, who wanted everybody to pray several times a day, including a few hours before dawn? Can you think how hard it would be to put up with someone who was pretty much sure that he knew it all, and would get quite testy when confronted with a different opinion, like the Apostle Paul?

They do sound like they are very different than us. And I also think that sometimes we get into a mindset that saints are warm, wonderful people who do good works. In point of fact, many of them were pretty difficult people, which gives me hope that I may someday be considered a saint, or at least that my occasional crankiness may be viewed as a fit of piety.

What is it that makes someone a saint? If you look it up in the dictionary, you read that a saint is someone who has an exceptional degree of sanctity, holiness and virtue. If you were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, you know that in that church, one has to have been proven responsible for miracles before they are named saints of the church. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, any Christian who has died and is in heaven is considered a saint. In our tradition, the title of Saint refers to a person who has been elevated by popular opinion as a pious and holy person. The saints are seen as models of holiness to be imitated, and as a 'cloud of witnesses' that strengthen and encourage the believer during his or her spiritual journey (Hebrews 12:1).

Saints! Some of us even ask them to help us, praying for them to intercede for us with God. There is, of course, the story of the itinerant preacher a good many years ago who went from town to town to share the good news, riding on his faithful horse. One Sunday he was galloping down the road, rushing to get to church on time. Suddenly his horse stumbled and pitched him to the ground. In the dirt with a broken leg, the pastor called out, "All you saints in Heaven, help me get up on my horse!"

Then, with superhuman effort, he leaped onto the horse's back and fell off the other side.

Once again on the ground, he called to Heaven, "All right, just half of you this time!"

The lesson? Be careful what you pray for!

But we hear these descriptions of saints, and these stories of saints, and we wonder what it is that makes saints different from everyone else.

As I was preparing this sermon this week, a friend asked me if there were any saints from popular culture. My initial reaction was no – so much of pop culture seems soulless to me – but the more I thought about it, the more names came to me. And one, in particular, stuck with me.

About fifteen years ago, I was in a book and record store and heard some music playing. It was a singer whose voice was amazing. She was singing jazz standards, the blues, songs from musicals, gospel...her range was remarkable. I went to the front of the store, and asked whose CD that was. "Oh, that's Eva Cassidy. A local artist," he said. I bought the two CDs immediately and took them home – Doug was as enchanted as I was by her voice and her artistry. You may have heard her – her cover of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" got a lot of airplay several years ago.

How had I not heard of this singer? She was so gifted! I started to research her and discovered, to my dismay, that she had died a few years before, of melanoma, at the age of 33. These recordings were posthumous.

But as I read more, one story really surprised me. Her last live performance was at a fundraiser to help her with her medical expenses. She was quite ill, and told the audience that she had taken a lot of morphine so she could come and sing, so she couldn't promise anything, but then she stood there and sang. The song? "What a Wonderful World." You know it: "I see trees of green, red roses, too. I see them bloom for me and you, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world!" It was just a few weeks before her death, and she had suffered terribly through her illness. She might have sung the blues, telling of her pain and struggle, but instead she sang a song of the beauty of the world, and how blessed she felt being present to it. That, to me, is saintliness.

That's the thing about saints. They see the world differently, and I think that is the quality that makes them saints. For them, God is present in all of it, and they see God in unlikely places. St Francis sees the exquisite Godly purpose of even an ant, and cherishes it as a gift. St Benedict sees the gift of prayer as a special way of being close to God, and the gift of work as equally important in being close to God, and lifts it up as a way of life of continual connection to the divine. St Paul sees the redemption of the whole world in Jesus' life, and especially in his own life, previously devoted to attacking the Lord's followers, and urges others to see how Jesus invites them into a better way.

All these saints see things differently. When they look at the world, the glass is not half empty. It isn't even half-full. It is brimming over with God's goodness, whatever the rest of us may see, and they cannot help but respond to it. They bathe the bodies of dying lepers and see the perfection of God in each wound. They stand up to the powerful and protect the powerless, because God is in each powerless person and because Jesus said, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." They sing "What a Wonderful World" while their bodies are failing, because their own pain does not outweigh the beauty of Creation.

Saints see things differently than we do.

But that doesn't mean we cannot cultivate the same kind of vision.

We, too, can see with our hearts and our souls as well as our eyes. We, too, can recognize Christ in unlikely people and places. We, too, can feel the divine in the smell of freshly baked bread and summertime roses, as well as in the rich earthy smell of compost and the tang of the ocean.

We sing of this in that great hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." Some of the words feel silly – shepherdesses, fierce wild beasts, teatime, and all that – but the heart of the song is true: any one of us has the potential to be a saint. All we have to do is look for God, and we will find the path to a new way of seeing the world. And what a wonderful world it is.

Amen.