

Sermon for All Saints' Sunday 2013 Luke 6:20-31 "Saints of God"

Back in the 1970s, when a committee of church musicians and clergy worked on the revised hymnal that would become the blue 1982 hymnal that now sits in your pew rack, one of the most controversial decisions that they struggled with was whether or not to retain the hymn that is so very clearly identified with the feast we celebrate today, All Saints' Day. Hymn 293. "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God." It's famous for lyrics like "And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, And one was a shepherdess on the green; They were all of them saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one too."

You listen to it and think, "My gosh, that thing is an anachronism. Sappy tune, lyrics that refer to queens and shepherdesses, teatime, a children's Sunday School feel." Not exactly "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," and yet when the hymnal committee went down the path of eliminating "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" for the 1982 version of our hymnal – the stated reason was lack of theological profundity - you would have thought they were proposing slaughtering kittens in the town square.

Fierce proponents of the hymn wrote impassioned letters in support of Lesbia Scott's simple ditty, first published as – you guessed it – a Sunday School hymn for children in 1929. They loved it.

And Anglicans around the world still love it. In 2003, the website anglicansonline.org surveyed its readers to submit their very favorite hymn.¹ They could only submit one. Some were no surprise – Amazing Grace, St. Patrick's Breastplate, Lord of All Hopefulness – but there, listed as Number 14, was "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God."

I think we love it because it is anachronistic – it makes us smile, doesn't it? – but I also think we love it because of its message. Saints are all around us, sometimes unlikely, sometimes special but usually ordinary people, who are saints, as the hymn says, because "they followed the right for Jesus' sake, The whole of their good lives long."

It gives us a different image of what saints are, one that sounds remarkably like something we might achieve.

That's a good thing, because if you are like me, your image of saints is based upon what you heard in childhood, the stories of martyrs and apostles and kings and wild-eyed prophets who lived in the desert. The sort of saints that would be pictured in orthodox icons. The sort of saints that feel very distant from our lives and even look entirely different from what we and those around us look like. I mean, they have robes and beards and all that...

If you are a baseball fan, you probably saw my beloved Boston Red Sox win the World Series at Fenway the other night. The Sox have been growing their beards all season long. It began as a lark by a couple of players, Napoli, Gomes and Pedroia. Soon the whole team was growing their facial hair, and some took to biblical proportions. One sportswriter commented on Mike Carp's beard by describing it as looking like something that belongs on Ishmael's father. Mike Napoli's facial décor looks much as I imagine John the Baptist looked when he came out of the wilderness and began dunking Israelites in the Jordan.

The biblical reference is not merely sportswriter humor. In 1918, there was a baseball team that wowed the crowds not only with their mastery of the game, but because of their amazing hair.² The team was fielded by The House of David, a Christian commune founded in 1903 in Michigan by Benjamin Franklin Purnell, a self-proclaimed messenger of God. The sect sought to reunite the 12 tribes of Israel in preparation for the return of Jesus Christ at the onset of the new millennium.³ We would call it an apocalyptic cult. The

¹ <http://anglicansonline.org/special/hymns/index.html>

² <http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2013/10/26/how-apocalyptic-cult-invented-baseball-beard-power/o2t0q7mhYgtYgE0pow9nyl/picture.html>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_David_%28commune%29

members eschewed meat, tobacco, alcohol and sex... and also the cutting of their hair. Because Purnell was a sports fanatic and believed in physical discipline to build faithful disciples, they played baseball. This venture also raised money for the commune, and the team played exhibition games against pro players like Babe Ruth. If you're thinking about the curse of the Bambino, famous in Red Sox lore, it didn't seem to affect the House of David players. Perhaps it was the fake beard that Ruth wore when he played them, much as fans have been wearing fake beards this season at Sox games.

They played the game well, and drew incredible crowds to their exhibition games, but it was a means to an end. However strange their methods, what these folks were trying to do was simple: they were trying to be saints.

With their long (very long!) locks and their bushy (very bushy!) beards, they looked like Jeremiah and Daniel and John the Baptizer and Augustine and St Francis of Assisi and even Thomas Aquinas in pinstripes and cleats. But they were not merely attempting to look like the holy ones of God. They were trying, in their strange way, to BE the holy ones of God. They were trying to be saints.

We laugh at their odd appearance, just as we have laughed at the hirsute World Series champs, because it's not what we expect from base ball players. It looks funny. But the notoriously superstitious ball players had something in mind. It wasn't about winning a World Series, it was about doing what was necessary to perfect their lives for God.

That's the very same message that the quaint old hymn offers to teach us how to be saints: "They followed the right for Jesus' sake, The whole of their good lives long."

And that is also the same message that Jesus himself teaches – the instruction manual for sainthood, if you will – in today's gospel:

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

For the record, Jesus didn't say anything about growing beards.

I know the Red Sox did not love the St Louis Cardinals. I know that Purnell's baseball players had some very strange ideas about how to live in the world that don't comport with my theology. I know that beards don't make saints, despite all the pictures of bearded saints that we've seen. But what I do know about being a saint is this: Sometimes we need to do something different from the world around us to be saints. Want to be a saint? Care for others who are unlikeable. Give away stuff, not just the junky stuff you no longer need, but stuff you still could use, like a warm winter coat. Pray for those with whom you disagree, and who say disagreeable things about you. Treat others the way you'd like to be treated.

Beards, however, are optional.

Amen.