

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 1, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
All Saints

When you think of the word “saint” who do you consider qualifies as a “saint”? My online dictionary gives three definitions for the word saint: 1.) someone honored by church after death; 2.) Somebody in heaven; 3.) Virtuous person.

The first definition: “Someone honored by church after death” could embrace the listing of names, the saying of names, and the lighting of candles such as we are doing today for All Saints Day. I am in full support of this definition and it is the one I am primarily using when I speak of All Saints Day. However, we cannot do full justice to the word “saint” without exploring the other uses and definitions just a bit.

Wikipedia suggests that in scriptures, the word "saint" did not denote the deceased who had been recognized as such, but rather the living faithful who had dedicated themselves to God. In that context, we who are present and faithful today could all be called saints. I also appreciate that definition. I believe it is good and right that all of us are referred to as saints where it would simply refer to our acts of attending worship, serving in ministries and being in fellowship as qualifying as to be known as “saints of the church”.

We are also familiar with the use of the word saint in Orthodox and Roman Catholic doctrine, where, as Wikipedia describes: “all of their faithful deceased in Heaven are considered to be saints, but some are considered worthy of greater honor, emulation, or veneration, with official ecclesiastical recognition given to some saints by canonization or glorification”. I have no real difficulty with the right of the Orthodox and Catholic Church to adhere to their practice of veneration or canonization.

I do, however, have significant difficulty anytime that we, who are human, attempt to determine who might be in heaven or who might not be in heaven. I prefer that God be the judge of each of us, not the clergy, not the hierarchy of the church, and certainly not based on any individual’s interpretation of scripture and judgment of the life of the deceased person. Therefore I have difficulty with the second definition provided by my online dictionary.

In regard to our third dictionary definition: “Virtuous person”, I have two thoughts to offer. Similar to the judgment about who is in heaven, I am uncertain that I trust in the judgment of any other person in describing someone else as a “virtuous person”. It is all well and good to describe the virtues of someone when we offer a eulogy or remembrances, but I, again, do not want to sit in judgment of another person as a clergy person or as an individual.

Secondly, I have significant discomfort when we “sanctify” a person so profusely at the time of death so that they are barely recognizable to others who may have known the “not-quite-so-saintly side” of that person. I believe honest reflections about an individual who has

died, do greater honor to that person's memory than an attempt to make someone out to be a "saint". I also think that it is important to the grieving person to not have to put up a "false front" in his or her grief, but rather to be able to uplift the positives and forgive those negative experiences they likely shared with their loved one. It is most challenging to live up to a saintly reputation in life, and it may be just as challenging for us to live up to a saintly reputation in death – or through the memories recalled by our loves us. Let us all feel free to remember our loves ones as saints and as sinners - sinners who have fallen short of God's expectations.

I want, now, to share some additional thoughts for all of us today who are grieving or who may have experienced deep grief in the past through the loss of a loved one. Both of today's texts can help in this exploration. Our text from Isaiah is clearly an eschatological text. Eschatology refers to the end of world, or end times, or the ultimate destiny of humanity. Isaiah 25: 8 says: *"God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of all peoples; God will take away from all the earth."* Biblical Commentator, James Burns, says, *"This is an eschatological text, and such passages carry two layers of meaning. At first glance they predict a future reality, where God's dreams and desires are manifest. They suggest an idealized state of affairs, one that may never be experienced fully, but that still reveals the intentions of God. Apocalyptic texts are also meant to provide a relevant word for the present day. Might we instead conclude that such texts affirm that God can break into history at any time?"*¹

At the time in history when this text was written, there was very little evidence for the Israelites that God was about to swallow up death. They had been defeated and dispersed. Yet the Prophet Isaiah encourages the Israelites, and us today, to trust in God to wipe away our tears. Biblical scholars also note that the eschatological language used by the Prophet Isaiah in today's text applies not just to God's chosen people – the Israelites – but actually applies to all God's children.

I believe this image of God wiping away our tears is a powerful image for grief. There is never a need to apologize for tears, yet the cultural message seems to encourage us not to cry – especially so for men. I am always deeply honored when someone is willing to cry in my presence. I never encourage them to stop crying, but I often give them a tissue to wipe away their tears.

And so it is with God. We will experience death and loss. Yet, we trust in God to wipe away our tears.

When we are immersed in grief we often feel as though there is no way out of our anger or our sadness. I remember one person who asked me if there was something wrong with her since she had not cried when her husband died. She said she loved him very deeply. Yet she had not cried even for a couple of years since he had died. When we explored her feelings a

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).

bit deeper, she came to realize that she had not cried because she feared that once she would start crying, she would never be able to stop. I encouraged her to trust herself, to trust in God, and to give herself permission to cry.

In today's text from the Gospel of John we read about and can experience the deep grief of many people over the death of Lazarus as well as the amazement they experience at his resurrection. The author of the Gospel of John provides us with contrasting images. On the one hand the author of the Gospel of John presents Jesus as fully confident in his divine ability to raise Lazarus from the dead. On the other hand Jesus is also fully, humanly, immersed in grief. John 11:33 reads: *"When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved."* In the Revised Standard Version of verse 35 we read the familiar *"Jesus wept"*.

Once again, I identify powerfully with this understanding of Jesus as fully human. Similar to us, we can have our faith in resurrection when a love one dies. Yet, it is still appropriate and even necessary that we allow ourselves to grieve for our losses. Jesus had his faith that God would work this miracle through him, yet Jesus also grieved in the moment. Jesus wept. He was compassionate to Mary and the other friends of Lazarus.

I find this image of Jesus sharing our grief as a powerful image. In this story Jesus does not take their grief away. May we always place our trust in God and know that Jesus shares our grief today – on this All Saints Day - and into the future. Amen.