

## SERMON – FOR ALL THE SAINTS

November 5, 2017 – Margaret Mitchell

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our salvation.

“Saints alive Margaret, just do it!” “Saints alive child ... will you just stand still!” How often during my childhood did I hear such words! As the middle child of five, I seemed to always be in trouble of one sort or another.... but that’s a different story for another time. “Saints alive child!” I can see me now... the stance, the rolling of the eyes and thinking... Saints alive? Really? Aren’t saints dead?

As a child and young adult, I had preconceived ideas about who saints were...

1. They were all dead people
2. They were mostly connected to the Roman Catholic Church, who have a patron saint for just about everything in life...
3. They were hundreds of years old
4. They were all very good people - saints in fact! Christian heroes and heroines - many of whom were martyrs and died for a cause
5. Depicted in paintings, stained glass, and beautiful icons in bright colours with golden halos adorning their heads
6. They were and continue to be, venerated

In Bible study this week, we talked about saints with a small s, and Saints with a capital S...

The internet definition of a saint (small s) is this:

*a person acknowledged as holy or virtuous and typically regarded as being in heaven after death.*

Well doesn’t that apply to all of us? Aren’t we considered a holy people? And don’t we regard heaven as our final destination?

The Oxford English dictionary has this definition of a Saint.

*Holy, canonized or officially recognized by the Church as having won by exceptional holiness, a high place in heaven and veneration on earth.*

Well that counts me out!

I believe the Capital S Saints are those as described in the Oxford Dictionary...

- We name our churches after them... in our own Territory of the People we have St Paul, St. Peter, St. Alban, St. George, St. Timothy, St

John the Divine, St. Michael, St Michael and All Angels, St Mary and St. Andrew;

- We refer to the disciples of Christ as saints - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James..etc. etc;
- We recall the saints from New Testament scripture and from the church, and attribute lofty ideals to them... the longer they've been dead, the more holy and saint like they become. But we tend to forget they were human beings, like you and me with human frailties and faults.

It wasn't until my early middle years when I returned to the church after a long hiatus that I began to learn more about Christianity, the church, and my faith. Bible study, my work within the church organization, four years of theological study through Education for Ministry, all helped me gain a better understanding of the scriptures, our prayer books, and most of all the terminology we use.

Saint or sinner? If I was given the choice of these to call myself, I would most definitely choose sinner... I honestly don't think of myself as a saint... how could I possibly live up to that expectation... (now there's an article waiting to be written for our next circular newsletter!)

Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians we are all given a variety of gifts ...”to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..”

So who are the saints really? In most of his letters to the communities he serves, Paul's opening words in his letters addresses the people as saints:

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus **called to be saints**, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...*

***To the saints** who are in Ephesus and are faithful to Christ Jesus...*

***To all the saints in Christ Jesus** who are in Phillippi...*

***To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ** in Colossae... and on he goes.*

The saints are our examples on the way to the kingdom of heaven. Their stories are the signposts which Jesus, “The pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2) has left to us who follow in faith.

And yet we hear in these Epistles, these letters of Paul to the churches in the region... the many, many problems he encounters and has to deal with regarding these people he calls saints... false teachings, arguments, adultery, divisions, cliques, idol worshipping... they weren't holier than thou people... they were humans with human failings! And yet Paul sees their potential, their calling... *called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

How about if I began my sermon this morning with a similar address... To the saints who are in Kamloops and are faithful to Christ Jesus... greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Now if you, like me, have a problem with referring to yourself as a saint.. how about we replace the word saints with children of God.

In our Epistle reading from 1 John 3 this morning we hear this... *"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are... Beloved, we are God's children now..."*

Children of God....saints with a small s...

And as such we are called to follow Jesus and abide by those two great commandments we heard from the Gospel of Matthew last week: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind... this is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

In the heavenly scene depicted in the Revelation reading, all the angels surround the throne and sing blessings of glory and honour to God; the audience around God's throne is further extended to include a vast host of people, an innumerable multitude *"from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."* Can you just imagine it? A truly universal audience which includes people from every part of the globe. No divisions as to race, or denomination, or faith, or language, or country of origin, or sexual orientation... millions upon millions of people who believe in and worship the same God. All are gathered, no one excluded, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. This is the description John gives us from his dream... this sea of white stretching out through the heavens... all children of God... all saints.

What a joyful celebration we are witnessing in this text! In biblical times, waving palm branches was a sign of joyful celebration, a great occasion, where singing and dancing, smiling faces and jubilant cries filled the air.

*“And they are all before the throne of God, worshipping Him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them ...they will hunger no more, and thirst no more... the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” ...what hope, what promise!*

All those who have gone before us are there in that multitude... our friends, our loved ones... husbands, wives, children, parents, brothers, sisters... all who have preceded us in the life of faith, and all those who will succeed us.

Today is an occasion for remembering with gratitude those whose lives bear witness to the blessing of God. It is with them in mind the Beatitudes are said and heard.

Just as in Revelation where a multitude is gathered around the heavenly Lamb on the throne.. so is a multitude, a community, gathered around Jesus in our Gospel reading from Matthew. These teachings are for them.... speaking to his followers in the midst of a public gathering, keeps them honest about who they are and where their commitments lie. This past summer we celebrated Pentecost at MacDonald Park... a gathering of the church community in a public place, just as in the Gospel. When we are seen in public as practicing Christians, it holds us to accountability of who we are and what we proclaim to believe.

The Beatitudes say: Blessed are those who.... In other words it gives its blessing; it is not a formula for happiness... if you want to be happy this is what you do. Neither do the Beatitudes intend to turn us into victims... it isn't a list of you should do this or else... it is a blessing for what we already do as saints, as children of God, in the world.

This is what Jesus is saying to the people around him... people who have risked everything to follow this man... people who are lost, lonely, afraid, persecuted, ostracized, alienated, poor, grieving, people just like us..

The Beatitudes are acknowledging what God has accomplished in us, in you and me, here and now... Jesus says: you are blessed now, despite the negatives that may be happening in your life.

And here I will paraphrase from other sources...including Eugene Peterson's The Message:

You're blessed when you live humbly, when you're at the end of your rope... for then you belong to God's new order.. with less of you, there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you experience loss, when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you;  
for you will receive strength... strength and compassion and support from God through the love and caring hearts and hands of others.

You're blessed when you are content with just who you are, no more, no less,  
grateful for what can never be taken away.

You're blessed when you ache for God's justice;  
you will receive what you seek.

You're blessed when you are generous;  
generosity will be shown to you.

You're blessed when your motives are pure; when you get your inside world, your mind and your heart, put right...  
then you will meet God face to face... God in the outside world

You're blessed when you labour for peace;  
in this you resemble your Maker... and will discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

You're blessed in suffering for what is right;  
for yes, then you belong to God's new order... and will be driven deeper into God's kingdom.

You're blessed when people harass and malign you.  
Keep up your courage, for the advantage is already yours.

This day then is a time to remember all those who have preceded us in the life of faith...

A time to remember our own selves living as children of God, as saints in the world, blessed for all we do in living our lives faithful to God's call...

A time to remember all those who will come after us.

"Saints alive, Margaret!"... yes we are, thanks be to God.