

All Saint's Day, 2009
Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California
The Rev. Kate Baird, Seminarian

RCL: Isaiah 25:6-9 / Psalm 24 / Revelation 21:1-6a / John 11:32-44

Today, All Saint's Day, we recognize those men and women the Episcopal Church honors as Saints. Until a few years ago I was largely unfamiliar with the concept of saints. You see I grew up in small town Iowa, a member of the United Methodist Church and remained an active Methodist until my forties. The only Saints we talked about were Saint Nick, every child's favorite, and Saint Peter, the angel that would meet us at the pearly gates. Saints for me were caricatures and fictional.

The more familiar use of saint was as a descriptor of behavior; being saintly meant behaving perfectly. It always calls up a vivid image of cherub faced children, all clean and well scrubbed doing exactly what they are told which usually meant sitting quietly. Or occasionally it meant doing or sacrificing for others but always in a nice polite manner.

Imagine my surprise when as a seminarian I began reading and studying about the people the Church recognizes and honors as Saints. These people were not good, polite or well behaved and they were most assuredly not well scrubbed. By societal standards these people were bad: they broke the rules, they were loud, sometimes bordering on obnoxious. Beyond being unpopular, they were mavericks, liberals and in many cases considered dangerous. Let's be frank, they are the kind of people society shuns and many of us try to ignore. Often, it is only after their death (and the deaths of their critics) that they are redeemed and recognized as saints.

This got me thinking: what then are the qualifications, what makes someone a saint? The best way to answer this may be to look at a sampling of the men and women the Episcopal Church recognizes as Saints.

The multitude of gifts possessed by William Wilberforce would have made him a popular and formidable priest in his day; back then a position of power and respect. Instead Wilberforce became involved in politics, becoming a dedicated opponent to the slave trade. His courageous lifelong campaign to eradicate slavery is credited as being pivotal to ending this horrifying practice. But to his contemporaries he was a troublemaker, a traitor. He threatened their economic livelihood, standing firm against the establishment and accepted morals of his day. He dared to recognize slaves as human and children of God even as the Church sanctioned and dare I say profited from slavery. No, his stance and his actions won him few friends but his tireless antics and hard work eventually succeeded.

Four amazing women: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Ross Tubman, devoted their lives to the cause of justice at a time when it was difficult to even survive as a woman. Through their energy and imaginative leadership, they made significant and lasting contributions to the rights of all people particularly women. Among them they challenged the church's

repressive role of women, brought an end to the dangerously harmful undergarments women of their day were forced to wear, tirelessly advocated for women's rights, and personally helped over 300 slaves reach freedom.

All of these women believed that God called them to their struggles. Rather than blame God for the evil and oppression conditions of the world, they identified them as man-made. Furthermore they took responsibility and dared to hold others, persons of power and wealth, to accountability. These women were not passive players but formidable, forceful women. Make no mistake they were not seen as saints during their lifetimes, but as trouble makers, dangerous, silly women who didn't know their proper place in life. All shunned by society and all broke the rules.

Since the early days Christians have honored men and women whose lives exemplify a heroic commitment to Christ and who have lived their faith even at the cost of their lives. Such descriptions tend to make us think of the early Christian martyrs. Yet such witnesses, by the grace of God, live in every age. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor and theologian, is one such contemporary Saint. Many German Christians openly welcomed Hitler's Nazi party to power seeing it as a historic moment of Christ's work on earth through and for the Aryan "Volk." Only a small number refused, and soon this Confessing Church became the center of Protestant resistance to the Nazis. Not only was Dietrich their leading spokesperson but he created and ran an underground seminary educating and inspiring youth to a different place of faith.

A devout pacifist Bonhoeffer discovered that he could no longer live with himself if he didn't try to stop Hitler and became intricately involved in a plot to assassinate him. The outcome we all know: he was arrested, imprisoned and finally murdered. Yet he continued not only to write from prison, but develop exceptional theology giving serious voice to a modern evil and man's relationship to God. This deeply pacifist theologian came to accept the guilt of plotting Hitler's death only because he was convinced that not to do so would be a greater evil. Today, his writings still inspire and challenge Christians around the world. But he too broke the rules, defied authority and followed his own path.

What is it that these diverse individuals have in common, what makes us honor them as Saints? They were all courageous individuals but history is full of courageous people we don't consider saints. All have a deep and public faith in God that they spent their life acting upon and clearly this is an important aspect of sainthood. Yet there are multitudes of folks who meet these criteria and will never make the list of saints. No there is something more, something unique, something powerful that allowed these individuals to continue when all those around them yelled stop.

All had an inner voice, a voice they believed to be from God, a voice which ran counter to the cacophony of dissenting voices around them. A voice that made them chose a different path, a path of resistance and courage, a voice that acted as a beacon when the inevitable darkness and doubt crowded in. God's voice; a voice of love and grace.

Each had a vision, not an ethereal dream, like Jesus they had a daring vision of what God's world should be like and a determination to move us towards that vision. Faced with unspeakable obstacles and evil they worked from a place of God's love. Filled with grace all worked tirelessly toward a goal, leading not destroying, loving not judging. For it is only through God's grace and support that these individuals could accomplish what they did. The same grace that is available to us all if we have the courage to listen.

These were not extraordinarily brave people. I doubt any of them set out to change the world. Rather they were ordinary people faced with a situation that was counter to their understanding of God's will. From somewhere inside they found the courage to speak out against the accepted conventions of the day, to shine God's light on the darker corners of our world.

As I've watched the news these last couple of weeks: taking in the horrors of children setting other children on fire, crowds of young people standing idly by while a young girl is repeatedly attacked my heart breaks and I'm filled with intense sadness. And yet there is a part of me that wants to scream: what kind of world have we created for our children, God's children, which could bring them to a place, where grabbing their cell and dialing 911 isn't just automatic. No, the incidents are too common, too widespread to lay it at their feet; it is something bigger, something deeper, and something crying out for a real public conversation. Even in this community relatively immune from such harsh realities, the meanness and darkness creeps in around the edges.

Our children need help, their lives cry out for a saint. We/ they desperately need someone whose voice brings solutions, words of real hope and light, not platitudes or condemnation. But where does that leave us, what can we do? First, I would ask that we pray. Pray deep and hard for God's loving light to break through the dark clouds.

But we can do more, I know we can. There is real experience in this room, talent and love honed from lives lived, experiences gained and battles fought. We may not have answers for today's children but we have methods, decision making skills that transcend time and we have love. From what little I do know, some of you in this room have real experience following that inner voice: you whose lives followed different, less conventional paths.

So I asked you today, as you prepare to come to the Lord's Table open yourself up the possibility of being a little saintly. Be bad, speak out when it not polite, defend those in need or push back against accepted conventions, dare to bring God front and center in a loving manner rather than through harsh rhetoric that is all too common. If we open our eyes and hearts God will present us with opportunities and the grace to succeed if we just take the risk. No, we may not be saints but together we can bring God a little closer. I can't think of a better way to honor those who gave their lives to spreading God's kingdom than to continue their fight.