

This Sermon was written by Rev. Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church

Be A Saint

11-1-20

Matthew 23:1-12

November first is designated as All Saints Day, a day to honor the martyrs who died for their faith. The meaning got confused when the Catholic Church began canonizing saints. I learned that the Catholic Church actually does not in fact make anyone a saint. Rather it recognizes (canonizes) a saint that has been present among us. Kenneth Woodward writes in his book, Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Decides Who becomes a Saint, "A saint is always someone through whom we catch a glimpse of what God is like and of what we are called to be. Only God makes saints, of course. The church merely identifies from time to time a few of these for emulation. The church then tells their story, but the author is the source of grace by which saints live."

Now we in the Protestant church tradition do not make or recognize saints nor do we pray to the saints or anyone else but God. Going back to the Bible we discovered that the Apostles addressed every day, common believers as saints. Paul writing to the Philippians, "To all the saints at Philippi." In the book of Romans, we read, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." But let face it, we do not want to be addressed as saints. "I'm no saint," we say. We are uncomfortable and think that we might be denied some pleasures if we were saints. To be called saints is to put too much pressure on us as we live the Christian life and attempt to get along with one another.

Saints: Who wants to be a saint, otherworldly, perfect, goody two shoes, holier than thou. It has the image of Mark Twain's description of heaven. In his Letters from the Earth he writes, "In man's heaven everybody sings. The man who did not sing on earth sings there, the man who could not sing on earth is able to do it there. This singing is not casual, not occasional, not relieved by intervals of quiet but goes on all day long and every day during a stretch of twelve hours. The singing is of hymns alone. It is of one hymn alone. Meantime every person is playing on a harp those millions and millions where as not more than twenty in a thousand of them could play an instrument in the earth or ever wanted to. Consider the deafening hurricane of sound, millions of voices of harps gritting their teeth at the same time. By now you will have noticed the human being heaven has been thought and constructed upon an absolutely definite plan and what this plan is, that it shall contain in labored detail each and every imaginable thing that is repulsive to man and not a single thing he likes."

I'm not buying that description of heaven. I believe heaven is a wonderful place to be united with Christ, family and friends to live in peace and harmony with one another. On All Saints Day we remember and honor the memory of those who passed before us to receive their heavenly reward.

The Biblical word for saint does not refer to perfect individuals but to forgiven people and includes those who attend worship services. Psalm 149:5 says, "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints."

The word holy is used interchangeably for saints, 1Peter 1:15, "Just as God called you to be holy, be holy in all that you do." The word means to be set apart, different from the world; set apart for God's purpose and to do God's will, to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We are saints because we have been made holy by Christ Jesus' sacrifice and not by our own efforts. Saints are not superior Christians; they are just redeemed church members.

Our scripture passage this morning is often titled "7 Woes" addressed to the Pharisee whom Jesus is critical of. He understood that the religious leaders of his day were making religion too difficult to live. These leaders were devout, they wore special clothes, carried out special rituals but made living one's faith hard. In contrast to this ritualistic religion, Jesus said, **"Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** I think of the Pharisees when I witness someone showing off their piety. Jesus may be saying, "Now just because you don't wear the kind of prayer shawls the Pharisees have or the fancy arm and head bands, that doesn't mean you don't belong to God. To the humble people hearing Jesus it must have been a very encouraging statement, "all who humble themselves shall be exalted."

I think Jesus is saying, "I believe that you, who see yourselves as sinners, can be saints." This message of Jesus was a word of hope to people who believed they were condemned, who were without hope, without the possibility of living their religion as the Pharisees taught. Jesus' issue with the Pharisees was that they were not living what they were teaching. They were not practicing what they were preaching. Later in this chapter Jesus says, **"Woe to you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cumin but have neglected the more important matters of the Law, justice, mercy and faithfulness."** Religion is about grace, undeserved kindness offered to those who are undeserving. Sometimes we forget that our salvation is dependent entirely on God's love.

I believe that sinners can become saints because I know Gus's story. Gus was born into a family whose mother was a devout Christian but his father, who was a leading citizen of the town, was not religious. Gus went through the rebellious teenage years, stole from his family but then decided to go to college and study philosophy and became a professor of philosophy. Gus had a mistress and a child by her but did not marry her. His excuse for his behavior was that he felt trapped and this kept him from taking personal responsibility for his actions.

His mother had had enough of his immorality and moved to the university where he was teaching. She talked him into attending church with her. He heard the priest preach and was impressed with his intellect and his faith. Gus' life was in turmoil and he was attempting to sort it all out when he went to the backyard to think and heard children's voices saying, "Take it up and read it." A Bible was nearby and he opened it and read, "Not in reveling, not in drunkenness not in debauchery and licentious, not in quarreling and in jealousy but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh." He made a confession of faith and was baptized by Rev. Rose whom we know as Ambrose, the bishop of Milan.

This happened in the year 386 and Gus is the man we know as St. Augustine, the most influential man in the Western Church.