

“I WANT TO BE A SAINT”

A Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

You know the song: “Oh, when the saints go marching in, oh, when the saints go marching in; *Lord, I want to be in that number . . .*”

Indeed, I do. I want to be a saint. I want to be in that number, the number of the redeemed, the number of the holy ones of God, when they “go marching in.”

But am I poor enough in spirit?

Reading along in the Gospel of Matthew, I think I see a checklist. I find that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are, for starters, poor in spirit. Do I qualify? If you had to write a letter of reference for me, would you call me “poor in spirit”? Or would you say that I am proud, even to the point of being touchy?

I want to be a saint . . .

But do I mourn? Will I need the comfort of heaven, or do I have all the comfort I need right now? What do I have to complain about, much less mourn?

I want to be in that number. . .

But am I meek? Is that a word that comes to mind? Someone wrote an article about me once, in a church newsletter, and described me as “soft-spoken,” which really surprised Christine. I think I used to seem meek to people just because I lacked self-confidence, not because I was trying to be gentle towards people. Jesus was meek: “a bruised reed would he not break; a dimly burning light he would not quench. I don’t qualify.

I want to be a saint . . .

But do I hunger and thirst for righteousness? Or do I really just want to be free of diabetes so I can

overindulge in sweets like I used to? I hunger for other things, like recognition and security and so on. I think I’m pretty happy to have attained my present level of righteousness.

I want to be one of the blessed . . .

But am I merciful? Pure in heart? Would you call me a peacemaker? Okay, I get a few points there, but mostly because I am afraid of conflict, not because I’d lay myself down for the sake of others. Do I get persecuted for righteousness’ sake, enough that I might claim the kingdom of heaven?

Perhaps, occasionally, some of these attributes stick to me. For a while. But on balance, I’m afraid not.

How about you? Do you want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in? Do you qualify?

Let me guess: No. We’re no saints. We’re only human, right? Nobody’s perfect. Some of us, sometimes, perhaps under pressure, make a run at sainthood. Most of us settle for being the occasional hero, or practically virtuous. And some of us don’t even try that hard.

On what authority, then, can I announce that you and I are in that number, and will be in that number, when the saints go marching in?

Because God has numbered us among his children. God has given us the privilege of counting ourselves among the saints. John says in the second reading, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God? And that is what we are.”

We may not look like “children of God” to the world, or even to ourselves. We look just like everyone else, and sometimes worse. But that’s because our

sainthood, our blessedness, is a hidden thing. It looks wrong to the world. The world thinks a lottery winner is blessed; the person who gets the promotion; the person whose finances are in order; the person not named in some indictment

People didn't realize who Jesus was; and John tells us the world has no clear idea who we really are. That's because our blessedness is a gift. And it is not premised on anything the world understands, but only on God's love for sinners.

John said to his congregation one Sunday morning, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

I say to this congregation today: "Beloved, we, too, are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

What love the Father has given us, that we should know already that we are "in that number," and will be "in that number," when the saints go marching in!

There is no need to hold your breath for the blessed day when you will become a saint. You are in that number already. Have been, from the time you were joined to the kingdom of God in the sacrament of holy baptism. You are already, even though not visibly, a part of the great multitude that no one can count, from all tribes and peoples and languages, who stand—this morning—before the throne and before the Lamb, with worship on our lips.

Being a saint is a gift. Entirely a gift. Always a gift. Nobody earns it. Nobody deserves it. Yet it is given to us. Given to us in three ways. Being a saint is given to us in our being born, in our living, and in our dying.

We are given "sainthood," which means holiness, when we are born of God, which is to say when we are baptized. In baptism we are born again into eternal life. We are not given temporary sainthood in baptism; we are given a name, a title; we are given existence. We become "children of God." Saints.

We are given "sainthood" in another way when we die. Do you know that the feast day of a person who has been given the title of saint is, if it can be determined, the day on which they died? By this the church means to say that death is the gateway to eternal life. This is the sense of "saint" which we are most accustomed to speaking of. We think of people who have already died, and who conspicuously lived by faith, like Matthew and Mark and Luke and Mary, as "saints." Yet all who die in the faith are equally holy before God. In fact, the last shall be first in the kingdom of God. We may look forward to joy to the day when we pass through death to the presence of God, receiving "sainthood" through our death.

Between birth and death is a third way in which we receive the gift of sainthood. John makes mention of it in our lesson today. He has already said that we "are God's children now!" and that we "shall be like Jesus when we die." But then he goes on to add that "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

So we receive the gift of sainthood also in the daily work God does in you and me to purify us, in this life, to serve him more and more faithfully.

The beatitudes of Jesus, which we read from Matthew 5, speak to this. Here in this life, earthbound yet heavenbound, we serve God at some cost, as though we were being made holy by walking in paths of righteousness: "We are poor in spirit" means we often do without yet without being discouraged. "We mourn" means we participate in God's agony over the rough shape of the world. "We are meek" means we do not insist on having

our way, knowing God's way is what matters. "We hunger and thirst for righteousness" means we are motivated to make things go God's way. "We are merciful" means we do not steer our course by opportunities to get even or ahead. "We are pure in heart" means we have only one God. "We make peace" because that is what God wants. We are persecuted because we take it personally when God and God's way are rejected.

In other words, we are given every day the opportunity for sainthood in our daily life. We face "the evil of each day," and we are given God's grace through his Word to purify ourselves by facing the world as God's children, bringing the world to God.



This is not merely a challenge or test. We are given each day the gift to "grow up" into the sainthood which God is giving us. We confess our sins, receive God's forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed are we, thrice blessed, upon whom the cross of our Lord Jesus is inscribed in water, who are today called "God's children," and who are called as such to be ourselves. Amen.

