

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH - Sunday November 1, 2020
22st Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Becoming a Saint”

Sanctify yourself and you will sanctify society. - *St Francis of Assisi*

COLLECT: Revelations 7:9-17 (The Message)

I looked again. I saw a huge crowd, too huge to count. Everyone was there—all nations and tribes, all races and languages. And they were standing, dressed in white robes and waving palm branches, standing before the Throne and the Lamb and heartily singing: “Salvation to our God on his Throne! Salvation to the Lamb!”

All who were standing around the Throne—Angels, Elders, Animals—fell on their faces before the Throne and worshiped God, singing: “Oh, Yes! The blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving, the honor and power and strength, to our God forever and ever and ever! Oh, Yes!”

Just then one of the Elders addressed me: “Who are these dressed in white robes, and where did they come from?” Taken aback, I said, “O Sir, I have no idea—but you must know.”

Then he told me, “These are those who come from the great tribulation, and they’ve washed their robes, scrubbed them clean in the blood of the Lamb. That’s why they’re standing before God’s Throne. They serve him day and night in his Temple. The One on the Throne will pitch his tent there for them: no more hunger, no more thirst, no more scorching heat. The Lamb on the Throne will shepherd them, will lead them to spring waters of Life. And God will wipe every last tear from their eyes.”

1st LESSON: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

REFLECTION: “Called to Be Saints”

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew remembers Jesus saying: But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

These words of Jesus are astonishing when you think about it. If we have children, we want them to have professions – maybe a minister, maybe a teacher, or instructor. We want our children to grow up and achieve a measure of success and respect. We want them to be parents, to be called father and mother. And yet Jesus tells us that as Christians, these worldly goals are peripheral.

We can never be in control as a rabbi, or teacher, or instructor is in the classroom. We can never master our material. In fact, as Christians we will always sit at Jesus’ feet, and be the children of our parent in heaven. And, even if we do this well, our greatness will come, paradoxically, from our humility, from our servanthood. All who exalt themselves, says Jesus, will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. Those who lose their lives, will find it.

As Christians, we are called to become something that is very much at odds with the world’s expectations. We are invited, as we discussed last week, to imitate Jesus. To not just put on the mask or costume of faith, as Jesus tells us some religious people do, but to truly absorb the implications of our faith. To not just be learned, and appear to be faithful through outward signs of religious devotion, to have the title, but by truly assuming the burden of Christ.

Paul echoes this idea in his first letter to Thessalonians, when he writes: As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

We are, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, called to be saints. We are asked to aspire to be one of the great cloud of witnesses we read about in Revelation, who have emerged from the great tribulation, our robes and battle scars scrubbed clean by Christ, standing before the throne of God, serving God day and night, singing and praising and praying with all creation.

Viewed from this angle, sainthood is a rather tall order, isn’t it? This view of Sainthood requires a rather fanciful imaginative leap, doesn’t it?

As one of you told me this week, when we were talking about our own end of life, life is so busy and full, that we don’t really spend much time thinking about what happens next, let alone whether or not we are going to be saints. Indeed, in my own life, I have only ever met one woman at the end of life that has eagerly thought of her afterlife in this manner. “Am I going to get to wear my crown?” she used to ask me. “Will my slippers really be golden? Will my robe shimmer? What do you think the heavenly chorus will sound like?”

And yet, although we do not think too much about our own sainthood, and whether or not we will sing soprano or alto in the heavenly chorus, there is no doubt that if I asked you about those you have loved and lost, that you would start to talk to me about the departed in words that sound very much like the words we use to describe saints.

You would talk to me about the difficulty of their last years, and how they faced illnesses such as COPD or dementia. You would talk to me about the sacrifices they made for you and your children and their community during their lives. You would talk to me about their resilience in the face of failure, and their ability to love, remain faithful and true to themselves and to you in spite of everything. You would tell me about their faults, as well, and how as they lived their lives they learned to accept their limitations, and, the limitations of others.

And, you would tell me – you would assure me – whatever their affliction, that like the Saints, “they hunger no more, they thirst no more, they are no longer subject to the scorching heat. They have been led to living water, and God is wiping every last tear from their eyes.

This is certainly how I hear us talk about the saints -- Don, Bruce, Bev, Carl, and Muriel -- we have lost this year. This is how I hear you talk about those other loved ones you have lost.

And when you tell their stories to each other, there is something about the sense that you are able to make of their lives, that becomes a light to you, showing you the way in your own darkness. The Saints we have loved who have passed somehow stay with us, helping us in our own moment of crisis, reminding us of what they did, or would have us do, helping us to choose light and life.

Saints abide with us. They will not let us go.

And I think that they become saints, because like Jesus, they were human, that paradoxically it is in being human, being truly human, that we best imitate Christ.

It is thought that the very earliest bit of Christian scripture is the Christ hymn found in Philippians. I would like to read it to you, because it urges us to be like Christ, through our human weakness and frailty – a process often called kenosis, or self-emptying.

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Yesterday, I sat at the bedside of a dear friend in the last stages of cancer. One of the things that she said to me, was, “I am ready. I have done everything I have needed to do in my life. There is nothing else for me to do.” In other words, she told me that she had emptied herself, that she had given everything she had to her life, her friends, her family, and her church. The cancer was eating away at her, and quickly taking whatever was left. And as she talked to me, as she told me that there was nothing left, I realized that her soul magnified the Lord – that in her nothing that was left, she was suddenly everything. Love. Compassion. Acceptance. Understanding. Honesty. And I wept.

This All Saints Sunday, this Sunday when traditionally it is thought that the veil between this world and the next is especially thin, when it is believed that the Saints are especially close to us, let us remember our saints. Let us remember the way they light our lives. Let us recognize that it is their frail fire and perfect imperfection that has lifted them up, their humanity. Let that be a comfort to us. Let us recognize that like Jesus, in their death, we discover something more than death. That the Saints remind us that the song of songs, that heavenly choir, never stops singing, and that when we are quiet, when we surrender ourselves to our limits, we can perceive the celestial harmony.

And let us remember that although we don't think about our deaths often, and the meaning of our lives, that to our loved ones we are Saints already. We may at times only sense our struggle, our anxiety, our grief, or our doubt, but those who love us see so much more. Our crown may be tarnished, and our robe frayed, and our slippers worn, yet to those we love, we shimmer. Each of us has someone who needs us, and who, when they look to us, see the light of God. And do not doubt for a minute that to Jesus and to God, we glow.