

All Saints' Sunday, November 3 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Who do you think of when I say "Saint"? Augustine. Francis. Mother Teresa? Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul? How about John Paul II? Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or George Bell?

Definitions vary. Various dictionaries suggest that "A saint is one who has been recognized for having an exceptional degree of holiness, sanctity, and virtue." Other words (via a Thesaurus include: an angel, a glorified soul, a holy being, a good and benevolent person, a pietist, a martyr, a loved one and, interestingly, "a hero" as synonyms for saint.

In our age, saints aren't limited to Christianity. Historians of religion now use the term in a more general way to refer to that state of special holiness, sanctity, and virtue that many religions attribute to certain people." So, for instance the Jewish *Tzadik*, the Islamic *wali*, the Hindu *rishi* or *guru*, and the Buddhist *arhat* or *bodhisattva* (*bOdi-sat-va*) are now also referred to as saints.

Categories/definitions of Saint:

1. Many early followers of Jesus, whose actions and words were a significant gift to our faith. These actions most frequently included writing the sacred texts (hence the gospel authors), displaying significant, selfless leadership (James of Jerusalem), being willing to die for what they believed (Felicitas and her companions), or all of the above: St. Paul. What's interesting is that holiness, sanctity, and virtue are not necessarily present!
2. Later followers of Jesus, some of whom made a difference to the spread of Christian faith also by actions and words - Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, or Cyril and Methodius, who helped bring Jesus' story to the Slavs (hence "Cyrillic", for the written language Cyril invented).
3. Dead individuals who having attained, through holy deeds or behavior, a specially exalted place in heaven now deserve the right to veneration. This is a particularly institutional definition, isn't it?!! Pope John Paul II is an example. Sometimes – often – this new status is lost on the rest of Christendom.
4. Followers of Jesus who stood up for clear Christian principles as they understood their faith against an institutional church, some of whom were murdered by that church. Bishops Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer, and Nicholas Ridley, and Thomas More come to mind.
1. Followers of Jesus whose life was a witness to the power of God working to transform the world, but who were part of a Christian tradition that – while recognizing the title "Saint" in antiquity, no longer uses that formal, institutional title. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and George Bell.

And, of course (and I say this with some irony) the original meaning of the word. It shows up frequently in Paul's letters, usually in his introductory greeting: "hagios", as in "those called to be 'hagios'".... "called to be saints". The original meaning was "holy ones", which does minimally connect us to the contemporary definition (someone who is/was holy, sanctified, and or virtuous).

Every human community needs people who fit one or more of these definitions, who live lives of

holiness, sanctity, and virtue: they remind us of all that is good in humanity, and model the potential that exists for us all to life fulfilling, good, generous lives.

In fact, we need folk from all those categories I described – who do these deeds and speak these words to remind us of our common human dignity, of the goodness that lies within each of us.

On this day we remember all of them.

But it's the last category that's so often overlooked. When Paul writes to communities who appear to be doing well – such as the one in Rome – describes them as “those called to be saints” (Rom 1:7) – called to be Holy Ones. But when he writes to the deeply troubled Corinthian congregation, he describes them as those “who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Cor 1:2). Not only holy, but also “sanctified”.

It's a way of him saying that being holy isn't predicated on right ethical behavior, or extensive knowledge about the faith, or humility, or any other attribute.

God makes us holy ones; baptism makes us holy ones. That's a constant biblical theme, namely that it's God's gift to us, not anything we do by ourselves, that effects or confirms our status as saints.

We're gifted with being holy – so what do we do with that gift? Jesus tells us what:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Our parish administrator, Kim Jones, suggested to me that rather than a sermon, I should invite anyone who wants to do so to come forward and briefly mention someone who they think of as a saint. I told her that if she suggested it she'd have to be the first one up here. Of course, if we did that we'd be here until after the Seahawks game – and who would want that?!!

But that's the point, really: we can all think of someone who will never show up on the calendar of saints who lived out of Jesus' list, and while it's rarely everything on that list it's often significant parts of it. You've heard me mention the priest in the parish where I grew up in London – David Macrow. But I can think of others, too. **And so can you.** They are witnesses to the best the human spirit has to offer, and, for us, witnesses to the grace of God present in all of us.

There's a quaint old English hymn that we used to sing every year on this day – interestingly it's done nothing but gain in popularity – it's in more and more hymnals, despite being written more than a century ago: “I sing a song of the saints of God”, written by a mother for her children, and not as a hymn. “And one was a doctor and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green; they are all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping to be one, too.”

Despite the grand words we hear about the traditional saints, I think that hymn's popular because it speaks to the simple and the every-day, and brings home to us the quest we're all on: that, God willing, we are striving to live with integrity and love, with compassion and goodness, and that while we might never embrace the idea of being a saint, we are striving, God helping, to live the life of a holy one of God.

May we continue to do so!

Amen.

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