

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 6, 2022

Set Apart

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who would you think of if I asked you to name a saint? Who pops into your mind when you hear that term? Is it one of the famous saints? Mary the mother of Christ? Teresa of Avila? One of the Apostles? St. Stephen? Or do you think of someone else? A family member perhaps? Or a beloved Sunday School teacher?

Preachers and teachers, martyrs and missionaries, what makes a saint a saint? The word itself is used only once in the Gospels – in Matthew post-resurrection we are told that “The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.”¹ That’s it, the only instance in the Gospels. Jesus never uses the word in his preaching or teaching. Paul uses it to some extent in the Epistles, but we don’t have a lot to work with in the New Testament. Even less in the Hebrew Bible! The word “saint” can only be found in Psalm 31:23 (NRSV), “Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.”

Clearly the concept of sainthood is not a major one in Scripture. Yet here we are with an entire church festival dedicated to saints. Some of our siblings in Christ in other denominations place a great deal of emphasis on the many and various saints. Many churches (even cities and countries) are named after saints too. For not being a large part of Scripture, saints and sainthood have become pretty important in many, maybe even most, church bodies. I wonder why that is. Why do we look for example of saintly living?

It strikes me that humans largely prefer to have examples of how to do things. We like guidance and guidelines for how we make our way through the world. Any group of humans living together long enough seem to eventually establish patterns of expectations, laws, and traditions. Then we tend to

¹ Matthew 27:52 (NRSV)

identify those we consider exceptional examples of those patterns of living and lift them up for imitation and/or aspiration.

We see this at work all around us; and as often happens, we can take it too far. This phenomenon leads to our (in my opinion) weird fascination with celebrity. And not just celebrity in the entertainment industry, we find celebrity in all areas of society today. Celebrity is at work in our market systems,² in the arts and sciences,³ and even in our politics.⁴ Our society has determined that the best examples for us to look up to are “successful” people who wield great power and influence. I find this very telling as to where our society’s values and priorities lie. Who we look up to says a lot about what we find valuable in the world.

What about the church? Unfortunately, church history is full of examples of the church worshipping celebrity too. Part of Luther’s problem with the church of his time was with how the saints were being used by the church. Just pray at this shrine where saint so-and-so’s skull is kept, and you will get out of purgatory that much sooner. While that sort of celebrity in the church is less common today, we still see the rise (and sometimes the fall) of celebrity pastors or theologians.

So, what are we doing today on this All Saints Day? Who are we lifting up as examples to look up to? And what might that say about who we are and what we value? Perhaps we need to explore what a saint actually is first. If we can be clear about that I trust we can avoid the temptation of celebrity and celebrity worship.

The word used so infrequently in the New Testament translated as “saint” is ἅγιος (*hagios*) which we can translate quite literally as “set-apart-ones” or “different-ones.” The word also shares a root with the word for “holy” or “sacred.”⁵ Put all of that together and saint means something like “set-apart-for-holiness-ones” or “God’s-different-ones.” Which leads me to wonder, set apart for what?

This brings us, at long last, to our scripture text for today. What have the saints been set apart for? What does it mean to be claimed by God for a

² c.f. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, etc.

³ c.f. Kanye West, Taylor Swift, Banksy, etc.

⁴ Pick a politician, they all want attention and celebrity if it helps their power and influence.

⁵ Strong, J. (2010). *The new Strong's expanded exhaustive concordance of the Bible* (Red letter ed.). Thomas Nelson.

different way of living? And who do we hold up as examples of that different-ness? Who can we think of who is just obviously different in a way that screams sacred or holy?

The sermon on the plain in Luke 6 tells us exactly what sort of behavior Jesus thinks the saints have been set apart for. This extended teaching lays out exactly who followers of the Way should be trying to imitate. Saints are those who love their enemies and do good to those who hate them. Saints are those who pray for the very people who abuse them. Saints are those who generously give to any who are in need. Saints are those who do not judge or condemn others. Saints are those who bless the poor, the hungry, and the grieving. Saints are those who follow the Way of Christ even when that means being excluded or even oppressed.

That's quite the list of values and patterns of living. Quite a hard list as a matter of fact! But we can make this Way much easier to remember, though not necessarily easier to follow! All of the values and patterns Christ lifts up as saintly in our text today can be summed up by one word: love. Saints are those who show the world what it means to love. Love God and love neighbor.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you,”⁶ Jesus teaches. And how would you have others treat you? At the most basic level, I believe, all of us are longing for acceptance, connection, and community. Beyond that we need to treat others the way they want to be treated, which is exactly how we want to be treated. Treating others the way they want to be treated means knowing them well enough to know how they want to be treated. Such curiosity requires a loving and accepting attitude. Saints then are those whose stance towards the world is acceptance, grace, and love. Saints are those who are open to connection and willing to put in the work of relationship and community. Saints are those who show us how to love God and how to love our neighbors.

So, I ask you again, who would you think of if I asked you to name a saint? Who pops into your mind when you hear that term? Who has shown you love in your life? Who has shown you **how** to love in your life? These are the saints we really need to remember today. These are the saints we are called to imitate and lift up as examples. These are the saints we are called to be. Amen.

⁶ Luke 6:31 (NRSV)