

What's In a Saint
Gene McAfee

Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
All Saints Sunday
Holy Communion
November 6, 2011

Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

“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.” -- 1 John 3:2

Last Monday was Halloween, and I imagine that none of the knee-high ghosties and goblins and almost as few of the accompanying parents were aware of the fact that Halloween originally belonged to the Christian church. We didn’t call it Halloween – that’s a corruption of All Hallows’ Evening, which we began to call All Hallows’ Eve – and All Hallows’ Eve was the night before All Hallows’ Day or All Saints’ Day, which is November 1st. We, like many churches, observe All Saints’ Day on the Sunday following November 1st.

Now we Protestants of the low-church wing of the Reformation don’t do much with saints, and there are a couple of reasons for this. The first is historical. When the Reformers were throwing out the stuff they thought the Roman Catholic Church had gotten wrong, they included the cult of the saints, which had been developing for about 1,400 years. If you consider that the Reformation started in the sixteenth century, that means that saints have been a part of the Christian church for a whole lot longer than they haven’t been part of Protestantism, and we need to give some careful thought to that.

And it shouldn’t really come as much of a surprise that saints have been a part of the Christian faith for a very long time, because the church has always recognized that the body of Christ has exceptional women and men who have lived out their faith in exemplary fashion. Those are the people who went well beyond the second mile when it came to living out their Christian vocation. Their devotion to God and their love for God’s world was truly extraordinary.

Wouldn’t you agree that Mother Teresa of Calcutta was an extraordinary Christian? The Albanian nun born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu devoted her life to caring for the poorest of the poor, the sickest of the sick, and the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. She herself lived in what you and I would consider abject poverty, and when Harvard gave a dinner for her and other recipients of honorary degrees in 1982, she was shocked at the amount of food set in front of her and she was horrified at the amount of food she saw thrown away. At her death in 1997, her worldly possessions amounted to two saris – the white and blue habit of her order – and a galvanized steel bucket in which to bathe. And she felt guilty that she owned even that.

Mother Teresa, as you might expect, is on the road to being recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church. Our language often becomes loose at this point, and many people say that the church will make her a saint, and that’s wrong. It’s equally wrong to say that she’ll become a saint when she’s canonized. The reality is that God, not the church, makes saints, and that the sainthood of the Blessed Teresa, as she is now officially known, was a done deal long before the institution began considering her for sainthood.

From the third chapter of the First Epistle of John, this morning's text: "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."

Today is the Sunday when we celebrate the saints, the children of God who make up that great cloud of witnesses famous from the book of Hebrews. We are surrounded by that cloud and we are part of that great marathon of people who didn't just mosey and meander through life, but ran instead a race directed toward a specific goal, which we call God's realm.

And that's very much what this day is about. It's about recognizing the fundamental difference between those who just drift along in life, stopping to smell the occasional rose here and there, and those who recognize that their life has a purpose that transcends its own unfolding.

"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us," Hebrews continues, "looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." That way of going through life is different – fundamentally different – from the "all paths lead to God" philosophy that is so commonly heard today. Let me say again what I've said to you before, which is that I do not subscribe to that philosophy. I do not believe that all paths lead to God. I believe that many paths lead to suffering and injustice and cruelty and destruction, much of which is not redemptive. There is nothing intrinsically redemptive about suffering, and many of the paths that we choose in this world, some knowingly and some ignorantly, inflict suffering elsewhere on God's creation, and I don't call that a path to God at all.

One of my boyhood pastors, the Rev. I. T. Blick, was fond of saying, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there," and as I've looked back over my own life and the lives of many of my peers, I see vast numbers of people who clearly don't know where they're going. They wander from this chemically-induced thrill to the next, from this dysfunctional relationship to another, from one unsatisfying career to a new one, from one twinkling, buzzing, beeping gadget to its successor, always trying to stuff something earthly into that God-shaped hole in all of us that Pascal said will be filled with God or it will not be filled at all.

That's the aimlessness our Statement of Faith says God seeks in holy love to save us from: "God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin." We're big on the sin part in the Christian church – we've always been an enthusiastic bunch of moralists – but the aimlessness part always seems to slip past our notice.

A recent survey of what sociologist Christian Smith calls "emergent adults," that is, folks 18-23 years old, found five dark realities that this group reports about itself. The first is the lack of a moral compass. Here's what a reviewer of Smith's book said in *Christian Century* back in September: Unlike conservative hand-wringers, Smith is concerned not about what emergent adults' moral beliefs are but about something worse: they seem unable to enter into any kind of moral reasoning at all. They instead default to hyperindividualism, believing that whatever seems right to each person is moral. Smith found that a significant percentage of those interviewed would be willing to allow the possibility that almost anything is right—except judging others. Judging another's individual choice or action and thus impinging on that person's moral relativity is the only thing that is absolutely wrong. (CC, 9/30/11)

And the second dark reality Smith identified follows closely on the heels of the first, and that is rampant consumerism, that young people today increasingly define the good life by what they can afford to buy. Let me quote again from the review of Smith's book: According to Smith, this consumption-oriented mentality has led young adults to define the good life in a way that has little or nothing to do with transcendence or the public good. Rather, almost all the emergent adults defined having a good life as having the means to buy what they want.

That is the sort of aimlessness that our Statement of Faith says God seeks to save us from, and it is precisely that sort of aimlessness from which the saint has allowed herself or himself to be saved. That is what makes a saint. That is what's in a saint.

A saint is nothing more than an ordinary Christian who has allowed God unfettered access to her or his deepest self and acts accordingly. That's all there is to saintliness. It's not mysterious, it's not esoteric, it's not even heroic. It's simply letting God fulfill the promise that, as God's offspring, we can be new creations.

When you really accept for yourself that your parentage is divine, when you actually believe that you are a child of God, nothing is closed to you, nothing is too hard for you, nothing is impossible. With God, Jesus said, all things are possible, and when, with the apostle Paul, you can say of yourself, "It is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me," you will discover what's in saint. And you will be surprised to discover that the only thing that kept you from seeing it before . . . was you.