

All Saints Sunday - Nov. 3, 2024.
The Rt. Rev. George D. Young, III

All Saints, Mobile, AL

Patronal feast - You are All Saints!

What does that mean to you?

Holiest folks in town?

Only perfect people welcome here?

Church - not haven for saints, but hospital for sinners.

What is a "saint" anyway?

Saint - woman married to a man who thinks he's a saint.

Lots to say - let's just say this is my working definition: "those who have helped us see and know God; have been partners for us in knowing we are loved, accepted, forgiven, cherished, beloved, that we matter - that we are somebody in God's eyes."

I mean - there are also those ones in the Bible, and big saints like St Francis and St Teresa and others - and we give thanks for them and celebrate them today.

But today - on this All Saints Day, we give thanks to God, for those who have been saints in OUR lives, in our churches, and in our world, and we pray that God will help us be saints in the lives of others.

When I first looked at the scripture readings for today, I was surprised to see the gospel passage is from John.

We used to always have the beatitudes from Matthew.

Remember the Beatitudes:

Jesus taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'

These 12 verses are the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which is 3 chapters in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus encourages people to choose God's way of love - emphasizing humility, forgiveness, and generous care for our neighbors.

That's what I would call the essentials of following Jesus, or - shall we say - being a saint.

does that make sense?

Does that sound right?

I wonder how many of you heard this last year in August:

In an interview with NPR, evangelical Christian and former Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore said that multiple pastors had told him disturbing stories about their congregants being upset when they read from the "Sermon on the Mount" in which Jesus espoused the principles of forgiveness and mercy that are central to Christian doctrine.

"Multiple pastors tell me, essentially, the same story about quoting Jesus in the sermon on the mount - specifically the part that says to "turn the other cheek" and to have someone come up after to say, "where did you get those liberal talking points?"

Moore added: "and what was alarming to me is that in most of those scenarios, when the pastor would say "I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ" the response would not be, "I apologize;" the response would be "yes, but that doesn't work anymore.

"That's weak."

That's weak?

Weak??

I think we have a problem.

I guess, then, the baptismal covenant, which we are about to recite together, is probably also weak, especially these last two parts:

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The overarching context from which the idea that these things are “weak“ is from Christian nationalism, and it seems to have taken over one of our political parties.

You’ve heard that there is an election coming up this week, right?

Yesterday Bishop Sean Rowe was inaugurated as the 28th presiding bishop of The Episcopal Church – I trust some of you watched that service.

So, today is the first day that we call Bishop Michael Curry our “former” Presiding Bishop. What an incredible leader he has been!

Here is what Bishop Curry has to say about this Christian nationalism:

“As followers of Jesus, his command to love our neighbors means neighbors of every type, of every faith, not just our own. Through our baptism and in our democracy, we are called to a way of love that creates a community in which the dignity of every human being is recognized and respected, and where all can have an equal say in the governing of our civic life. The violence, intimidation and distortion of scripture associated with “Christian nationalism” does not reflect the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, and so I stand with fellow leaders in the Christian community and call for a better way.”

So - as “saints of God” in - as Bishop Curry says - in the Episcopal branch of the Jesus movement- how are we to live?

What are to be our priorities?

As we “confirm” people today - as they make a mature, public commitment to be Jesus followers - what are we to offer them as models of saintly living?

Regardless of who wins this upcoming election, what are we to do?

In the passage from John’s Gospel today, the theme is that life is more powerful than death. Ultimately Jesus will show that in his resurrection, he has conquered death, and evil and death does not have the last word.

And as for saintly living - did you notice what Jesus said after he called Lazarus out and he emerged, with cloth binding him?

Did he say, “watch this as I complete this miracle?”

No - he said “YOU unbind him, and let him go.”

That's our mission, our call as well - to partner with Jesus in unbinding people and laws and structures in our life together.

God's way of love - emphasizing humility, forgiveness, and generous care for our neighbors - that's the standard for us.

And whether or not our civic structures model this - our elected leaders - governors, presidents, even our Supreme Court justices - it is our call, our role, our way of living.

Back in the '70s, we used to sing a song called "They'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love."

The music is outdated, but the words are as true as ever!
"They'll know we are Christians by our love."

Speaking of the '70s, there was a woman author and professor back then named Verna Dozier, and one of the things she wrote that I have gone back to over and over for about 30 years is this:

She wrote: "don't tell me what you believe. Tell me what difference it makes that you believe". What difference does it make that you and I believe?

Words are definitely important, but who we really are is shown by how we live.

So - in just a moment, I will ask a couple of questions of the young man being baptized, and then I will ask a couple of questions to the people who are being confirmed.

And it is really important that they stand up in front of God and everybody and answer these questions about their relationship and intentions individually.

And - after that, I will ask you, the whole congregation - a question, and it may be the most important question of the whole service.

I will ask you - the entire congregation, "will you who witness these vows do all in your power to uphold these people in their life in Christ?" and your answer - if you really mean it is - "we will!"

Think of it as being your commitment to join them and Jesus in "unbinding" people, right?

Now, I don't really know you all who are this All Saints parish, but most places I've been in the Episcopal Church are kind of reserved and tend to be quiet in church, right?

Well - I want to invite you to press the edges of your comfort zone today, and when I ask you that question, I want you to shout out your answer.

That makes sense?

Do you think you're up for it?

Just those 2 words - "We will!"

All right!

Thank you for the privilege of being with you today, and especially thank you for the multitude of ways each of you are saints in the world.

You make a difference - a big difference - I hope you know that.

Saints of God, All Saints - thank you!

And for God's sake - please - keep it up!