

“THE DEPTH OF RESURRECTION HOPE”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Ephesians 1:11-23, Revelation 7:9-17

(11-03-19) All Saints

Today we mark All Saints Sunday in the church calendar. The date of All Saints is actually November 1, but most Protestant churches that celebrate All Saints mark it on the Sunday following November 1.

You don't hear a lot of sermons for All Saint's Day in Presbyterian churches. Some of that comes from a reluctance on part of Protestant churches around ideas that seem too "Catholic," but most of it I think is rooted in our lack of knowledge around exactly what the day is meant to celebrate. Maybe the most common association with All Saints is that of Halloween, which again feeds into the reluctance of many in the church to embrace something that seems connected to questionable practices. The word 'hallows' means 'saints' and 'een' means 'eve,' so Halloween means the evening before All Saints, which is why Halloween is on October 31. Though Halloween today has a very particular connotation, it wasn't always this way. Originally Halloween was a day to prepare for the feast of All Saints, a time of preparation to honour the saints, and in the Roman Catholic tradition, to pray for those souls who had yet to reach heaven.

Today, despite the secularization of Halloween, churches are celebrating All Saints as a time to give thanks for those Christians who have faithfully transmitted the faith to successive generations, but All Saints isn't only about honouring those who have died, but also those still living who participate in the work of God's kingdom, God's reign in the living of their lives. So what exactly is a saint, who would qualify?

There is an old story about two brothers who lived in particular town where they were involved in corruption, deceit and every manner of vice. It was rumoured that they were affiliated with some famous organized crime families as well. Whatever the case, both brothers had accumulated much wealth through their dishonest and possibly criminal ways.

There was little grief in the town when the older brother died. But his younger brother, wanting to honour his elder sibling, went all out in planning the funeral. The problem was finding a priest willing to do the service, given that neither of them had ever graced the pews of a church. Knowing that the one of the local churches was in the midst of a capital campaign for some much needed repairs, the younger brother called upon the priest.

"Father," he said, "I know my brother and I never attended your church, as a matter of fact, we never attended any church. I also know that you've probably heard a lot of things about us, this being a small town and all, but I'd like you to do my brother's funeral. And if you'll say that he was a saint, I'll write you a check for \$50,000. That'll go a long way to fixing up your church."

After some thought, the priest agreed to perform the service. The priest, however, also had a condition. The \$50,000 had to be paid in advance, and so it was. On the day of the funeral, the church was crowded. Curiosity brought dozens of people in, who were certainly not there to honour the deceased man, but to see what the priest would actually say. The remainder of the crowd was made up of mobsters and the women the brothers associated with. The service began with the usual scriptures, hymns and prayers - and then the sermon began.

The priest began slowly, but then step by step, launched into a litany of the horrible things the rich man had done, how he had been selfish, greedy, corrupt, caring about no one but himself, carousing with women, drinking excessively, and on and on.

The younger brother, sitting up in the front pew, was getting hot under the collar about how the priest was not fulfilling his promise, but during the service there was not much he could do about it. He could only wait and hope that the priest would keep his end of the bargain. Finally, after about ten minutes of outlining the rich man's flaws, the priest concluded his sermon in a booming crescendo proclaiming:

"Yes, my friends, this man was a no-good, dirty, rotten scoundrel!"

But, compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

It may be a good story, but I still prefer the Stephen Farris definition, **saints are those who the light shines through**. But sometimes I think we get a little confused by what we mean. Over the years we've made a big deal out of people we call saints. And in the churches that still canonize people to sainthood, it usually takes a long time before anyone can be called a saint. It took Mother Teresa, someone who had been awarded the Nobel Peace prize back in 1979, until 2016 to be declared a saint by the Roman Catholic church, almost 20 years after her death. Despite some controversy around her faith, Saint Teresa of Calcutta is nearly universally revered as a saint, a person of deep commitment and action. And we in the Presbyterian Church aren't immune to the attraction of saints. We name our churches after the likes of St. Andrew and St. Giles. Often the depiction of saints in art or stained glass comes complete with a halo of light around their heads. **But saints aren't those upon whom light rests, but those through whom the light shines.**

And its surprising through whom the light does shine. It's not only those who we might expect but often it's those who we would never suspect that the light shines through. For every St. Andrew or St. Giles, for every Mother Teresa, there's a single mother, struggling to make ends meet, through whom the light shines as she loves her children and sacrifices for them. **For every saint that has earned his or her halo, there's an unsung person who seeks no recognition but whose life of service allows the light of God shine through in some of the darkest places on earth.**

I remember back when I was in Malawi, meeting a woman named Mary. Her husband had contracted HIV from prostitutes while working in mines in South Africa. He had infected Mary with the virus before he died of AIDS. His family blamed her for his death and while she was sleeping with her children, they set her house on fire. She suffered burns but escaped with her life. She recovered and worked for the Presbyterian hospital in northern Malawi as a support worker for mothers with HIV. I remember one night she came to our group with a request. She didn't have the money to send her children to school that year. The money from the hospital was barely enough for her family to eat but there was nothing left over for schooling. She wondered whether we might be able to help out a bit. It would take only about \$100 for her kids to go to school for the year.

We were more than happy to help out, but she wouldn't just take the money from us, she insisted on giving us some of the beadwork she had created and also some of the batik fabric she used to make the wrap around skirts so common to that part of Africa. Even in her desperate need to provide an education for her children, she wouldn't just take a handout; she wanted to offer something in return. And there are so many other

stories of saints who are all around us, among us, some who we might expect, but many more who are unexpected.

And so it shouldn't surprise us to read in the passage from the book of Revelation **that the picture of heaven is a picture that is more inclusive and generous in scope than anything we might have imagined.** The vision that was given to John is one of a great multitude, uncountable, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, all standing before the throne and before the Lamb worshiping God. **Instead of a picture of a small number of the strictly faithful, what Revelation paints is a vision of God's generosity in grace.** There are so many around the throne that no one could count and they are from every nation, all tribes and all peoples and all languages.

So, what is it that allows people to live as saints in our midst?

It isn't always what we think. Often we think of those people whose faith and vision and moral integrity has been thoroughly examined and widely known; those normally long dead people who have been judged to have advanced the cause of God and goodness in this world; those people who have been deemed to be worthy of imitation and of praise by both church and popular opinion.

But when we get right down to it, these people are only bright examples of something that is very common, namely men and women of a deep and abiding faith in Jesus, a faith that has issued forth in action, in living out their faith. In the Bible, in this morning's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, and in all of Paul's letters, the word "sanctus," the word saint is applied without further distinction to any and all who believe in Jesus and who strive to live faithfully according to his teachings and his example.

Listen to the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus, in which Paul tells them who is writing and to whom it is that he is writing. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the same greeting that Paul uses when he writes to the church in Rome, or in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Saints are all around us, they are people who are holy, but by holy we don't mean people, who walk on air, but people who are very ordinary, like you and me, people who believe in Jesus and seek to live as faithfully as they can as his disciples.

Saints are those whose faith in Jesus bursts forth in love for others. They are those, in Paul's words from our text this morning, **whose eyes of their hearts are enlightened, who know what is the hope to which God has called them, who know the riches of God's glorious inheritance and the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those who believe.** Saints are those who live with the knowledge that our mortal lives are contained within the eternal life that God has prepared since the beginning of creation. Saints are those whose depth of resurrection hope is rooted deeply in the promise of Jesus Christ. **And because the depth of resurrection hope is so strong and certain, saints are those who can live this life with an openness, a lightness that allows the light to shine through.**

I still remember a man named Oscar, the father of a family in Mexico for whom I helped to build a house on a mission trip. At the end of our build Oscar and I were looking at the pictures of our time constructing his house on my digital camera when I

inadvertently showed him a picture of my house. I was embarrassed. Here was this little house we had built, cement floor and wood framed walls, smaller than my garage. I didn't want him to see the pictures of my house, but he wouldn't let me turn the camera off. He wanted to see and he was truly happy for me. It might have been the most powerful moment of the whole trip for me, that this man who lived in such poverty could wish such happiness for me. It was a moment of unexpected grace from an unexpected saint.

This was a man who could have been bitter, bitter about his lot in life, especially compared to these mission workers who would only be there a week, then return on comfortable buses back to our comfortable lives and luxurious homes. But he wasn't bitter, the eyes of his heart were enlightened, his hope wasn't in the structures of this earth, but in the place prepared for him from the beginning by the one who raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. The depth of resurrection hope, the hope that sustains us in this life because we know that it's not the final life, can give us the grace to live life with joy, with hope and with openness.

I think openness is the key to living as a saint. If a saint is someone through whom light shines, it means that there needs to be permeability in that person. What I mean by that is this. Some people are either so convinced of their own opinions or so fearful of the opinion of others that there is absolutely no space in their hearts for something new or different. There's a denseness to their hearts and their lives, a rigidity to their thinking and even to their faith. Nothing more than what's already there gets in

and nothing shines through because of how dense it is. It's like they think they have to protect what's there lest they lose it and then they would have nothing left to fall back on. But a saint isn't so protective because a saint knows that it's not our strength that matters, it's not our power or ability or even faith that ultimately matters, but God's. It's God's power in Jesus Christ, in the hope rooted in his resurrection, that's really what matters.

You see, the light isn't ours, it's God's.

We aren't saints because of our own goodness, but because our openness invites God's goodness to be made effective, made visible through us, by our willingness to be used as instruments of God.

And when we get that, when our hope is rooted deeply in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, when our lives, with all its trouble and suffering, all its joys and triumphs, when our lives rest within the eternal life of God's love in the resurrected Jesus, we don't have to be so rigid or dense, so fearful or protective. **We can be more open, more permeable, more transparent so that the light of God's love in Jesus can shine through us, be lived out in us, be borne in our lives as witnesses to Jesus Christ and our hope in him.**

Jesus treasures those who aren't perfect, those who hurt and suffer, who, like the Mary's and Oscar's are able to survive with their own humanity intact despite the way they have been treated by the world, in spite of their lot in life. **Because of the depth of their resurrection hope, this part of themselves becomes a shining light, becomes the window of their souls, and a lighted path for all our souls. It's how God's light shines through them.**

For the saints are not among us to show us the way into easy, comfortable lives. They are here to show us how to keep going even in the deepest darkness.

And so, we celebrate all saints, we celebrate all the saints, we celebrate those who have gone before us into the company of saints, but also those who worship in our midst, and some who suffer silently. We remember those in our community who love God and neighbor, and yet find themselves on the margins. And we remember those whose worship of God is unceasing, even now that they have passed into perpetual light.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

***Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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