

Sermon for All Saints' Day, November 1, 2019:

As I prepared my sermon for today, the Feast of All Saints, I began by asking the obvious question: What, exactly, is a saint? The answer, as you can imagine, it depends on who you ask.

Most people of faith will agree that a saint is a holy person, with the word Saint deriving from the Latin word *sanctus*, or holy, but that is where the similarity ends.

Growing up in the Protestant faith, I was taught that all Christians are saints, and that the Roman Catholic canonization and veneration of the Saints was nothing but idolatrous poppycock.

Even in our own Anglican tradition, Article 32 of the *39 Articles of Religion*, states quite clearly that “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”

This was later softened to mean that while we do not believe that the saints can bestow blessings or mediate between us and God, we can view them as being set apart from other Christians as especially holy, and we can ask them to pray for us and act as our intercessors.

Roman Catholics believe that a saint, with a lower case s, is anyone who forms the great cloud of witnesses mentioned in Hebrews chapter 12. They also believe that a Saint, with an upper case S, is anyone who has satisfied the official requirements of canonization, and can therefore bear the official title of Saint. The church makes a sharp distinction between the veneration, or simply honoring of saints, and adoration - which is only reserved for God himself.

The various branches of the Orthodox Church also venerate saints in a slightly different form than the Roman Church. Miracles are not required for sainthood, for example, and the process of canonization is also referred to as glorification.

I could obviously go on and on about the finer points of the ways in which Christian churches differ in their perceptions of the saints, but in order to deepen my own devotion to this particular feast day, it helps to go back, once again, to the basic similarity. We all can agree that saints are believers who are recognized as being especially holy.

In my own thinking, the word holy means that above all other things they serve as an example, a role model, of closeness with God.

The collect for today says that the saints are blessed people that we can follow “in all virtuous and Godly living,” and the last section of today’s Gospel from Luke seems to describe the example we are meant to follow:

“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 one 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.”

Most of us, myself certainly included, would look at that list of exemplary behavior and say “I could never be a saint if I have to follow that example. That’s impossible!”

There’s a modern poem by an anonymous author that paraphrases this passage by asking:

“Why were the saints, saints? Because they were cheerful when it was difficult to be cheerful, patient when it was difficult to be patient; and because they pushed on when they wanted to stand still, and kept silent when they wanted to talk, and were agreeable when they wanted to be disagreeable. That was all. It was quite simple and always will be.”

To all of us actual humans who are prone to impatience, and bad moods, and wanting to yammer on and on rather than listen, that list does not exactly sound simple.

But really, though, it is in *trying* to live up to these examples that we can grow towards God, and we can at least partially emulate the lives of the holy ones who have gone before us. We may try, and fail over and over, but as long as we keep getting up and trying again, we’re heading in the right direction.

We can also try to populate our lives and our thoughts, with good examples – solid role models and mentors who give us a standard towards which to strive. We can keep the saints in heaven in our awareness, and we can surround ourselves with the saints here on earth who can constantly influence us towards a positive and a

Godly path through life.

There are so many things that compete for our attention in this loud, busy and tumultuous world. If we can set an intention to filter out the negative ideas, conversations and people that separate us from the love of God, then we can place ourselves in the realm of influence of holy people who point us to a positive view of the Christian hope.

I try very hard to keep saints like John the Baptist, St. Agnes, and St. Lucy in my awareness as examples of how to hold on to my faith against all odds, and I also keep everyday saints like my Sunday School teacher Miss Barton, my grandparents Rufus and Zelda Turner, and our departed CSJB Sisters in my awareness as a standard by which I can measure myself. I even bring these examples of Godly living into my decision-making process by asking questions like “What would my grandparents think if I did this?”

When it comes down to it, the saints are, of course, just people. But they are holy people who by their example can help us to reach, in the beautiful words of the Eucharistic prayer, that “heavenly country” in which we are completely reunited with our loving God.