

I SING A SONG OF THE SAINTS OF GOD

Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 2, 2014

Readings: Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34, 1 John 3:1-13; Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon text: Who are these, robed in white, and where do they come from? Revelation 7:13

First, I'd like to introduce some saints in training: Ben Conklin, who is going to talk about about St James, and Cooper Kasin, who has picked St Matthew.

You see, you are never too young—or too old—to be a saint in training.

It's like singing. Even an infant sings—so Peter tells me—because we are born with a self that wants to express itself in song and music. We also have a self—call it soul—that wants to express itself in love, in an outward movement of the heart to God and others. It is learning to trust in God and keep pouring out that song and that love—and not to get discouraged or fearful or prideful and turn them back into self, in self-criticism and self-defense and self-love.

Just as there are all kinds of songs and music, there are all kinds of saints. And many of them are connected, as followers, first of Jesus (and we always keep Jesus as our main teacher here), such as Peter, Mary Magdalene, Matthew, and James. And then on through the generation: as Peter taught Mark, Paul taught Timothy, and so on. A communion of saints (like a gaggle of geese or a herd of deer), the great cloud of witnesses, an army robed in white, in the vision of John of Patmos. These were those who had come through the ordeal: meaning, of course, persecution and martyrdom, but also the ordeal of living out one's faith in a world that always presents reasons to give in, turn away, seek only for self, run away from danger. Whatever draws us from the love of God—the definition of sin—is the same thing that weakens our best self, that moves us from saint to sinner—and we are always drawn both ways. Like John said, we pass through the ordeal, the test of life.

What makes a saint? Most weren't priests or bishops or popes; just brave and faithful people in all sorts of work: doctors, nurses, soldiers, students, teachers, merchants. Becoming a saint is not a matter of the work they do or whether they are nice or mean, regular folks or eccentric or geniuses, but whether they give their lives to and for God and the world. Training for sainthood is working toward becoming fully the person God made you to be, without being driven by fears and facades, the masks we wear in the world to get what we want or avoid being hurt. It's about letting these go and trusting in God—in the power of love and truth and justice—despite all opposition, defeat even death. the soul embedded in and trusting in the power of Spirit.

Becoming a saint is not about being nice and never mean— in fact the opposite of conforming to other's expectations: It is St Francis, taking his clothes off in the square

and announcing his prophetic task to rebuild the church; it is St Ignatius, giving away his armor and possessions to follow King Jesus to the ends of the earth.

Saints are usually pretty strong and straightforward people. Consider Teresa of Avila, who had to fight against the inquisition, which suspected her mystic visions of being demonic or bogus, against the male hierarchy, who plain didn't like powerful women, until finally she established a whole series of communities of women saints in training and her written works—classics of spirituality and prayer— were approved. Even then the church took some time—from her death in the sixteenth century until 1970 to honor her as a ‘doctor’ of the church, one of the first and still among the few women so honored.

Saints are found not only in the history books of the church but in recent and local history: Dorothy Day, whose fight against poverty in the first half of the twentieth century resonates today. Martin Luther King who fought against racism and injustice in the fifties and sixties. Jonathan Daniels, who was part of struggle and someone people here have heard about, as well Charlie Johnson, who also gave his lives to save others. Saints are people we know and admire and wish to emulate—while remaining true to who we are.

I will give a local example. Fritzi was a member of the church Bruce Chilton serves. Bruce, whom someone of you know, is a priest and new Testament scholar who teaches at Bard. I met him recently and a few days ago picked up one of his books, *The Way of Jesus*.¹ Chilton, concluding a chapter entitle “Soul”—that which makes you you— describes Fritzi this way:

“When I first arrived in the church that I serve, a woman who called herself Fritzi was a mainstay of what we did. She organized, bakes, cleaned, ironed and folded linen, visited people in the congregation, and on special occasions made a wonderful meatloaf, all of that apart from volunteering at our local hospital. Each interaction would produce from her some remark or reflection, a joke or reminder or a little rebuke, that left whoever she dealt with a little the wiser and a bit more thoughtful than he or she had been before. I wondered what Fritzi so vital.

Thirty years before I met her, Fritzi was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach. Her survival was unusual. so was her reaction to survival. She decided that both the church and the hospital, the institutions that had brought her through her illness, deserved her help; and she never wavered in her devotion. At the time she started supporting these institutions, both of them were marginal, the hospital near to a merger and the church about to close. Today both of them are thriving, independent concerns, and many people at each place still have a story to tell you about Fritzi, her gravelly voice, and how she made them feel welcome and safe. As far as I know, the biggest regret in her

¹ Bruce Chilton, *The Way of Jesus: To Repair and Renew the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 12010), 44-45.

life was that she had once made her daughter stand in a corner too long. Her daughter had no memory of that incident.

One morning Fritzi's sister called me in some concern because Fritzi did not answer her telephone. We both went to her apartment and found that Fritzi had died in her sleep. she was in bed, with a book and glass of sheer near to hand. A friend remarked to me, "She died the death of a saint." I thought to myself that perhaps that was because she had lived the life of a saint, Fritzi was my sage when it concerns how to live with an awareness of one's Soul."

I would like to finish by singing a hymn that Peter tells me is new to this congregation—but easy to sing—"I sing a song of the saints of God" (The Hymnal 1982, #293). We will use it for the recessional but I would like us to sing it now, taking in the words and joining them in prayer. I will sing the first verse and then you all come in for the remaining two.

I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.
And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
and one was a shepherdess on the green;
they were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God helping, to be one too.

They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
and his love made them strong;
and they followed the right for Jesus' sake
the whole of their good lives long.
And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,
why I shouldn't be one too.

They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store,
in church, by the sea, in the house next door;
they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,
and I mean to be one too.

In Christ's name, amen.

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