

God Didn't Make Plaster Saints

All Saints' Sunday

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10,13-14, Revelation 7:2-4,9-17, Matthew 5:1-12, Psalm 149

St. David's Episcopal Church, Bean Blossom, Indiana

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Timothy R. Fleck

Are there any saints here today? Please raise your hands.

How about sinners: are there any sinners here today? Good.

In our world, especially in the Protestant part of it, we tend to be a little "iffy" on the idea of saints. We may say, "Oh, that Martha, she's such a saint to put up with Barney and all his faults." Or we may say, "well, of course, Uncle Leroy was no saint, but who is?"

But when we're challenged to say exactly what we do mean by saints, we get a little uncomfortable. Is a saint someone who is perfect? Is a saint someone who is without sin? Is a saint some sort of rare and extraordinary being? Or are we all somehow called to be saints?

Even in the readings chosen for today, the commemoration of All Saints, we feel some tension in knowing what it is that we are talking about. Are we talking about the famous, the powerful, the talented, as in the reading from Ecclesiasticus? Are we talking about the martyrs of extraordinary faith of the Book of Revelation, the ones who have come through the great ordeal and have proven themselves worthy by their faithfulness even unto death? Or are we talking about the meek, the poor, the downtrodden, and those who minister to them, as in the Sermon on the Mount?

Would we even know a saint if we met one? There are some obvious cases we might be able to agree on— people that we could agree to call saints, but then there are the borderline cases. Mother Teresa? Probably. Martin Luther King? Maybe. What about Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop assassinated for his support of the poor against an oppressive Salvadoran regime? Or Harvey Milk, the San Francisco city supervisor assassinated for his sexuality? What about Bill W., founder of Alcoholics Anonymous? What about Billy Graham? Or Mister Rogers?

Unfortunately, I think a lot of our ideas of sainthood are a little confused by misunderstandings about the Roman Catholic Church's formal process of beatification and canonization. We read about the late Pope John Paul "creating" hundreds of saints, and about a decades- long process of determining whether someone is worthy of canonization, whether miracles have been worked in that person's name, and it seems as though the whole idea of sainthood is something very alien to our daily life as Christians. Saints are another order of being altogether. Saints are holy, and we are certainly not holy. Saints are other people.

On the one hand, we demand perfection of our saints. We even deny their humanity and whitewash their biographies. We want Abraham Lincoln in his humility and his honesty, but we don't want to hear about his manic-depression or his loveless marriage. We want Mahatma Gandhi in his self-denial and non-violence, but we're uncomfortable with some of the idiosyncrasies of his personal behavior.

On the other hand, we have an almost pathological need to find human flaws in our saints, as though their humanity somehow excuses our own lack of holiness. A few years ago, there was great uproar about the movie “Barbershop,” because it dared to point out the human failings of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks: some of the saints of the civil rights movement.

Both of these impulses start from the same assumption: that to be human and to be a saint are somehow mutually exclusive. It is easier to believe this. If we acknowledge that saints are people, are flawed, are human just like us, but that they are somehow holy nonetheless, then we would have to admit that we could be holy, we could be saints, but for some reason we don’t seem to be.

Thomas Merton, a deeply human man whom some have called a saint himself, calls this the ideal of the Plaster Saint: we create this stereotypical idea of a saint that is so removed from our experience, whose example is so unattainable, that it’s pretty easy to let ourselves off the hook for failing to achieve it.

We think, “Of course, I’d love to go to Calcutta, live in poverty, and minister to the dying. But I’m just an ordinary guy – not a saint like Mother Teresa.”

In his book *Life and Holiness*, Merton advances the radical idea that we are all called to be holy; that we are all called to be saints.¹

While we may like to believe that saints are not human, Merton starts from the assumption that it is precisely being human that makes sainthood possible. To denigrate our humanity is to miss the whole point of the incarnation: God becomes human and takes on everything it means to be human. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, knows what it is to be broken, knows what it is to be wounded, knows what it is to be human. To be most Christlike, most saintly, is to be most perfectly human. Our weaknesses and our brokenness are essential parts of our humanity and therefore essential to our relationship with God.

To be a saint is not to be removed from humanity, but to glory in it. To be a saint is not to be inhumanly perfect, but to be perfectly human.

But to be human in this sense is much more than simply to be an animal, a member of the species *Homo sapiens*. And Merton reminds us that much of what we do and the ways we treat one another alienate us from our own humanity and deny the humanity of our brothers and sisters. Work which reduces labor to a commodity, obsession with moneymaking, grinding poverty, anything which lessens rather than increases human dignity does not qualify as being human (p.94-95).

But once we recognize that God has chosen to create us and to love us in our humanity, that God loves our idiosyncrasy and imperfection, we cannot avoid the conclusion that we are called to love one another in the same way. In a few minutes, we will reaffirm our baptismal vows. In those vows, we are called “to seek and serve Christ in all persons.” Well, now, it’s easy to love the Christ-like parts of our neighbors; but the real challenge is to love the parts, to love especially those parts,

¹ Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

that don't look much like what we expect Christ to look like, that don't have much in common with the plaster saint. To love the meanness, the dirt, the pain. We can't afford to love one another "in spite of" brokenness and confusion. If we are to love one another as Christ loves us, we must love one another precisely because of those human weaknesses. We're called to love people, not plaster saints.

The other half of this understanding is expressed in the next phrase of the covenant: "loving our neighbor as ourselves." Just as we can, with God's help, love the broken parts of others, we have to be ready to love and even to share the broken parts of ourselves. The wounded parts. The weak parts. The human parts. We have to be ready to acknowledge that these embarrassing, uncomfortable parts are often just the pieces that God chooses to use.

This call to holiness, this call to sainthood, is a call to the radical love of humanity. Loving humanity doesn't only mean that the saint loves each and every human being in his brokenness and his weakness. Loving humanity means that the saint can't afford to hold herself aloof from the brokenness and weakness of actual human beings. A saint loves humanity not as a superior being condescending to an inferior, but as one sinner to another, in full knowledge and acceptance of every part. Consequently, the saint's own brokenness and imperfection is not simply something which she has to overcome or which we have to overlook, but it is in fact at the core of what makes her able to be holy, to be a saint.

It is so difficult to acknowledge this brokenness, this shadow in ourselves. This difficulty is one of the greatest obstacles to true love and therefore one of the greatest obstacles to holiness. We are eager to share the best of what is in us: our talents and gifts, our joys and accomplishments. But we are more likely to hide the darker parts of ourselves. We may be willing to forgive others their weaknesses and failures. But as for ourselves, well, it is hard enough to admit to ourselves our broken parts, let alone to lay them out before our brothers and sisters and expect to be loved for them. But we cannot truly love the brokenness in others until we do.

To be a saint, then, is much closer to us than we had imagined. And at the same time much more difficult. We are not disqualified from sainthood by our humanity, but this means we no longer have humanity as our excuse, either. God loves us in our brokenness, but that means that we are expected to love the brokenness in others as well. God does not despise our shadow, but does not allow us to deny it, either. By comparison, the life of the "plaster saint" seems easy: no doubt, no temptation, no dark side. But God didn't make plaster saints.

So let me ask one more time: are there any saints here today?