

Calvary United Methodist Church
November 4, 2018

THE TROUBLE WITH SAINTS
Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

John 11:32-44

I invite our kids to come forward and I'll share a time with our kids. How are you doing today? This is like my favorite time. (It's mine too.) Is it? It's not because of the fruit snacks, right? (Yes.) It is? Well, you know, you go with what you can do, right? And how are you? I think you've grown an inch in the last five months I've known you. (Guess how old I am.) 37? No? 6? 7? 8? 5? Are you 5? Well, you are really big for your age. (I'm this many.) You are that many? (Child speaks.) You are 5? That's a really good guess. Thank you. And you are (6.) Six. And you're 8? 9, oh, sorry. That's half way to 18. I'm 10. Ten? And 6, 6, 6 and you're 5? (4) 4. Yeah. Don't ask me what I am half way too. (Children speak). Oh, you are 10, that's half way to 20. You'll be driving before your father turns around.

Did you all go out trick or treating on Thursday? Or sometime? (My bucket overflowed with candy.) Overflowed with candy? Did you bring me any? (I got so much candy.) What did you dress up as? (Black Panther.) The Black Panther? (I dress up as a cheerleader.) A cheerleader. A football player. (An incredible bull rider.) An incredible bull rider? (No, there is something that was...) Oh, you step into it? (Oh, yeah, and it looks like I'm riding a bull.) Oh. You were (A Ninja.) A Ninja. What did you dress up as? (Buzz Lightyear.) Buzz Lightyear. And how about you? (Child speaks.) And you? You were a mermaid. Did I forget anybody here? (Ninja, same like him.) Ninja, ok! (You forgot...) This will take a while. She was, she just told me. Refresh my memory. (Alice Morgan.) Alice Morgan, ok.

How many of you remember your baptism? How old were you? (Ten.) Ten, oh, you just got baptized? No. Were you like a little baby when that happened? (But I still remember it.) You remember it? There are people that remember absolutely every minute of every day they have been alive. They really crowd their brain. Do you remember it? When you were baptized you were clothed with Christ. That doesn't mean you have to put on a robe and put a beard on, you know. You don't have to do that. You'd look funny with a beard anyway. (Child speaks.) Actually, you're clothed inside and that's one of the things that we remember today. Because in baptism we put on Christ and we are in Christ and so after this life is over we're in Christ's presence and that's the really cool thing.

And when you put on Christ, you don't have to wear a robe and grow a beard and you know, you are not ready for that anyway, right? You don't want to shave, not yet. What you have to do is let him clothe you on the inside so he teaches you how to be nice, how to be kind, how to do the right thing, how to stand up for the right thing, how to be a wonderful person.

How many here want to go to jail? Nobody wants to go to jail. Talk to Mr. Lindsey over there.

He knows a lot of people don't want to go to jail. Of course, if you do some stupid things, they will have a place for you. But if you are clothed in Christ, you'll never go to jail. (Child speaks.) I have visited jails often, and that's when they use the whole title. (Yesterday we were going to class and we saw a big crash.) You did! Oh, my! (Child speaks.) This is called losing track.

Let me go back to the wonderful people I know who have gone on to God's presence. We call them saints. Now, either you are a saint or you ain't. You don't have to be very special to be a saint although because you are God's child, you are very special.

So, let me give you the best definition I know of what a saint is: behind me we have this beautiful stained glass window that I think goes back to 1955. Do you see it? 1955, boy that was about 200 years ago, right? (Whoa!) I don't remember it, but I'm told I was around. Anyway, when you look at the stained glass window, what do you see through the window? (Colors, lights.) Lights. That's what a saint is. A saint is someone who has Christ inside and the light shines through them. Now that stained glass window tells a story and the reason we have stained glass windows in church is for two reasons. First it tells the story of your church and second if the preacher doesn't have much to say at least you have something nice to look at.

The best definition I have of a saint is people who let God's light shine through them. (Child speaks.) We do, you are right, there is one in the chapel. That's right. And they tell a story.

So saints are just people who let the light of Jesus shine through them and that's your job, now that you are baptized, to let the light of Jesus shine through you. And you can do it. It already does. It shines through your eyes. Every time you smile, don't smile, right? (I'm smiling too.) Are you smiling? Don't smile. You are trying really hard, right? He closed his eyes so I can't see him smile. But I see. That's why it is so fun. I love you guys.

Let's smile and pray. Lord... (Children speak.) You know what I want to give you this time? Because you guys are so important, really. And they will stay anyway. It's ok. Alright, let's pray: Thank you, Lord, for those we know who have gone on, whose lives shine in you and help us to let your light shine through our lives. And I thank you for these kids. Help them to grow up to be just wonderful kids, filled with you. Amen.

Message:

Would you join me in a word of prayer? Lord, help us to hear from you this day. Speak to our hearts of this great hope we have in Christ who is the resurrection and the life. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in our sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It was Robert Louis Stevenson and later on Mother Teresa quoted him saying that saints are just sinners who keep on trying. And we often think of saints of these perfect people who have

never done anything wrong...not so much as had a wrong thought in their head, just perfect purity. And actually, nothing could be further from the truth. But then, all who hear the call of Jesus to follow are saints. Because saints simply means to be set apart for God, as we follow Jesus in his life and his way of living in this world.

Now, the trouble with saints is that they seem to have done all of these amazing, heroic, self-sacrificing deeds and we've never done any of that stuff, so we call them saints. But the reality is they were and they are men and women with feet of clay and many of them lived some pretty wild lives in their time. They carried the scars of those wild years into their lives and into their profession of faith, but they followed Jesus. And when they fell down, they got up again and they kept following. And that's their only secret. We fall down, we get up. And falling down and getting up is probably as good a description of the Christian life because nobody gets it perfect and if you are struggling with perfection, give it up, because nobody is perfect.

It's been 21 years since Mother Teresa died in 1997 and about 11 years ago her diary was released and we were all surprised to find out she struggled with major depression. She battled despair. She often had a sense of hopelessness which she wrote about in the dark night of her soul. And despite all those inner struggles, she got up every morning, did her devotions, went out to wash the brows of dying men who were brought in that night from the streets of Calcutta, and feed the hungry mother and child and school the children, organize her nuns. So saints are simply sinners who keep on trying.

Now, if there is one thing that is a common thread in the lives of saints is that they have come to know their need for God. That's what gets them up. And they don't waste time polishing their halos or waxing them, they just simply recognize their deep need for God and they go there.

Now, that's a part of the rhythm of the spiritual life, to go there. It isn't every day that we are just getting better and better and we are going to be all so wonderful. It's simply, we fall down, we get up, we keep Jesus in sight and we hang in there.

Now, the Revelation that John read, the passages read, was written for people who were falling down. The Revelation is not a very difficult book, we've made it into a difficult book, but it's really not very difficult. These are people who are having a hard time, struggling under the oppression of Rome and the emperor and the Christians were being isolated, arrested, tortured and the temptation they had was to deny Christ and to pay worship to the emperor. And many opted for this. And those who refused were thrown to the lions in public arena or crucified and in some cases Nero would coat them with tar, mount them to a cross and light them up. It was a horrible way to die. And many followers of Jesus met this fate.

Now, John was one who was caught up with all of this. He was brutally tortured. Some say he had boiling oil thrown on him. And then he was exiled to a little island which is not more than a rock in the Mediterranean. And John wrote this amazing letter to that persecuted church and

he offered an alternative vision of this life and of following Christ. But a part of that is that we see this multitude of people streaming in the gates of heaven, those who had faced great tribulation in their early lives and still, though the world gave the worst it could give them, it could not take away the gift of life given to them by the Lamb of God.

So, John affirms the grace and comfort of God for the faithful that never again will they suffer, never again will they face such humiliation of the powers and authorities who treated life so lightly as if there were no consequences. It's a beautiful picture, the Revelation, of justice, but of victory and of comfort.

Early on, as the church lost so many they began to think about these who had gone on and had left good profession of faith and so they wanted to remember them because they lived in the light of those who had gone on, but you and I do too. I am indebted to saints like Gregory of Great who wrote a book that is still in print for pastors, it is called *On Pastoral Care*. I am indebted to Francis of Assisi who came probably the nearest to loving like Christ, crazy as a loon, but sometimes when you follow Jesus, that's how it is. I'm indebted to people like Martin Luther or John Wesley and no less am I indebted to all kinds of saints, like Simone Weil who was martyred in the Holocaust, a French woman who was Jewish and received Christ, or Suzanna Wesley, and of course Mother Teresa. And when you read their writings they inspire us, they guide us in our walk with Jesus.

I think of Saint Lawrence. He was a sixth century pastor. He was a great organizer. He generated databases. That was one of the things he did, of members and church buildings and the resources of the church. And when the Roman Emperor deposed the current bishop of Rome it was made known to him that Lawrence kept the accounts of the church, so he demanded, as a ransom for the bishop that Lawrence would bring to him the treasure of the church. So Lawrence dutifully sold of anything that they had in property and then he brought what he could to the emperor. He assembled all of the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the disabled, the orphans, the widows and presented them to the emperor. The emperor was outraged at the sorry lot and poor little bit of money that he got and he said, "What is the meaning of this?" And Lawrence said, "These are the treasures of the church because Jesus gave his life to buy each one of those standing before you." Saint Lawrence lit a lamp for us to follow Jesus a little bit better.

I know that there are lamps lit by your loved ones and friends gone on and they also guide us. They too are saints. Surely they struggled with their discipleship, just as we. They fell down, just like we fall, and they got up and they showed us how to carry on in faith. So, saints are sinners who just keep on trying.

Now, while the Revelation, the 21st chapter that was read, gives us this final victory of God, the picture that John gives in the 7th chapter of Revelation, it takes my breath away. It brings tears to my eyes. The vast multitudes who have gone on, some who have gone on through great trial and tribulation and suffering and sacrifice and martyrdom; people who have gone through great

illness and pain, suffering; victims of violence; people misunderstood because of the choice they made to follow Christ. They are there in his presence, this vast multitude who know the consolation of heaven. For God is not the God of the dead, as Jesus reminds us, He's the God of the living, which means that this day, All Saints Day, is not a day of sorrow, it is actually a day to lift our eyes and look up and to rejoice in the victory of those who now know the everlasting company of the saints and angels in the eternal presence of God. And in this scene we see enacted the great Christian hope, that love is stronger than the power of death. Well, today as every day we are in the merciful presence of Jesus, by grace through faith. We only see snippets of the kingdom, just little bits and pieces of it. One day we will see it in its fullness; it will take our breath away.

But for now we are content to have a foretaste of it. We have the never failing presence of Jesus near to us. We have forgiveness, we have peace with God, we have a way to be reconciled with all others. That reconciliation is what quells the noise and the fear and the disturbance and the rivalry and the hate and the prejudice and all those other things, this reconciliation that Jesus has provided for us with his own body. And we share the promises of God and have the hope of the certainty of things unseen eternal in the heavens. And those who have gone on before have reminded us that when we fall, Jesus gives us the power to stand.

I think of Shirley's grandfather. He was an old time preacher, and old Pentecostal preacher. He came to us one Thanksgiving and said, "This is my last time to have Thanksgiving with us." And Shirley said, "How do you know that?" He said, "I'm in the last stages of cancer." She said, "You have to have the first stages." He smiled, but he knew what he was talking about. Later on I was scheduled to take a trip to Israel. He was getting sicker by the day and I said, "Granddaddy, do you want me to put this trip off to see Jerusalem?" He said, "No, you go ahead. You see the old Jerusalem. I am going to see the new Jerusalem." And he left this life surrounded by his hospice workers, his wife and family who were singing him into God's presence and I thought what a beautiful way to leave this life, to be in God's presence that way.

Well, for all the saints from whom their labors rest, we are thankful for them. We are thankful to God. We remember them with love and with gratitude and we rejoice with them because their struggle is over. And we give thanks to God for so great a salvation that they know in its fullness, and they light the way for us to be faithful too.

And now we are those everyday saints who are sinners who keep on trying and never give up. And those yet to come need our faithful witness so the call before us on this day is twofold, to remember and to rise to the call of discipleship to let Christ shine through our lives. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory always in Jesus Christ. Amen.