

What Makes a Saint

This morning, we celebrate All Saints Day, a time to commemorate all the saints, known and unknown. It's one of only seven principal feast days on the church calendar, right up there with Christmas and Easter Sunday, and one of just four days specifically recommended for baptism. It's the only feast day officially authorized for celebration on the following Sunday, a blessing when the day itself, November 1st, falls on a weekday as it does this year. All Saints Day is a big deal, and it should be. While the vast majority of our worship rightly focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus, his church continues to exist two thousand years later because millions of faithful people, most of them unrecognized by history, have kept it going. Without the saints, the good news of the Gospel might never have made it out of Jerusalem, much less survived for over two millennia. It's right to honor them every year, and it's important to understand who it is that we're celebrating. So, exactly what makes a saint?

The Episcopal Dictionary states that a saint is simply a "holy person, a faithful Christian, one who shares life in Christ. The term may also indicate one who has been formally canonized or recognized as a saint by church authority." Paul's letters suggest that all members of the Christian community can be saints, but as our dictionary explains, the term has come over time to refer "to 'elite' Christians whose lives were distinguished and exemplary because of their self-sacrifice, witness, virtue, or accomplishments. Special recognition was given to the martyrs of the early church." That shift in understanding was a result of the Emperor Constantine's legalization of Christianity. Suddenly, people started joining the church, not necessarily because they believed in Jesus, but because it was politically wise to follow the emperor's lead. Knowing Jesus's distaste for lukewarm devotion and, I suspect, wanting to encourage greater fervor in his

followers, the western church started to honor exceptional Christians, especially the martyrs, more than a thousand years ago.

Throughout history, most Christians have been illiterate, so stories of the saints were told in pictures. It became an artistic convention to depict saints at key moments in their lives or accompanied by symbols representing how they were martyred. St. Joan's sword represents her military exploits to save France for God, but St. Paul's sword signifies both his battle to Christianize the gentiles *and* his beheading in Rome. St. Sebastian is usually portrayed shot through with arrows. Several of the saints carry amputated parts of their bodies in portraits, which seems a little gruesome to modern sensibilities. These saints suffered and died for their Christian faith, though, so it's appropriate to get past the "ick" factor and honor their sacrifices.

The church's focus on its early martyrs makes sense because humanity needs its heroes. However, its emphasis on physical suffering may have created unreasonable expectations for what a saint has to be. The Roman Catholic Church's canonization process hasn't helped. In 1234, Pope Gregory formalized a multi-step procedure that requires candidates not only to have lived a life of heroic virtue, but to have died "in fame of" sanctity or martyrdom. After death, they must have interceded with God to produce at least one or, absent martyrdom, two miracles. It's not impossible to be canonized this way. Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a formerly Jewish Carmelite nun who was murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz, was canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1998 after she was determined to have interceded in a miraculous healing. (She was added to the Episcopal calendar of saints in 2022.) The Roman process appropriately venerates exceptional Christians, but I question its emphasis on martyrdom and miracles. Jesus knew that people are too quick to look for signs to guide their faith. If sainthood is possible for all Christians as Paul's letters suggest, we need to get over our fascination with drama and divine

pyrotechnics. People who live quiet lives in faithful service to Christ can also be saints, not only those who suffer and die horrible deaths for him.

If we truly want to know what makes a saint, we need look no further than the Beatitudes. Jesus tells us that certain people are blessed. The word he uses, *makários* (μακάριος), includes the idea of extending, enlarging or lengthening. As Kevin Stone, the “Greek Geek,” explains, Jesus means that, when God blesses us, “He ‘extends’ His benefits to us. He ‘enlarges’ His mercy to us. He ‘lengthens’ His charity in our direction. Forget the long arm of the law — this is the long arm of God's grace!” Stone notes that Jesus doesn’t direct his listeners to be meek or merciful, to hunger for righteousness or to seek out persecution. Rather, Jesus promises that, when God extends grace to us, we acquire the qualities of the blessed. God’s grace turns us into saints, and that enables us to happily serve God’s only begotten Son as only saints can.

We Episcopalians can be ambivalent about our saints. Our church no longer canonizes anyone. Instead, we add notable souls to our feast calendar and commemorate them or not depending on congregational affiliation and custom. Many Episcopalians play Lent Madness, rooting for our favorite saints to win the Golden Halo. But some of us may be put off by the way our Roman cousins venerate the saints. Both the Roman and Episcopal Churches draw a clear doctrinal distinction between veneration, respect that can properly be offered to the saints, and worship, which is adoration reserved for God alone. Practice can blur that distinction, though, especially when prescribed prayers and elaborate artwork are involved. For Episcopalians that lean Protestant, veneration of the saints can too easily slip into worship, especially when offered to the Virgin Mary. Personally, I wonder if Episcopalian suspicion of Marian veneration isn’t tainted by an unhealthy dose of misogyny. Recognizing that worship belongs to God, I’m always polite to my friends’ mothers. Offering respect to the gracious saint who raised our Lord, or

asking her to add her prayers to mine, isn't idolatry. It's the humble recognition that Mary sits far closer to the throne of God than I do. It just makes sense to ask for her help sometimes.

Each of us gets to decide whether and how to venerate the saints. There are three things to remember about them. First, if they're alive in the next world – and there's no point engaging with them if they aren't – the saints worship God at least as devoutly as we do. Should we make the mistake of slipping for a moment from veneration into hero worship, I think we can trust them not to take it too seriously. They know they're not God, and they'll happily help us redirect any misplaced adoration to where it belongs.

Second, the saints weren't superheroes in their earthly life. They were imperfect people, just like us, who devoted their lives to God, sometimes under horrible circumstances. They became saints because God blessed them, extending divine grace and transforming them into extraordinary souls. Their stories give us hope that God can, and will, do the same for us.

Third, we don't begin to know how many saints have graced this world with their faith, hope, love, and courage. We only know the ones who have been publicly recognized by the church. There are and have been countless others, faithful souls who have blessed the world across the centuries and continue to be a blessing today. They pray and study in houses of worship in every nation. They serve as God's hands and feet in this world, bringing hope, comfort, and mercy wherever it's needed. A goodly number of them worship and serve right here at St. Luke's. Saints are, after all, merely faithful people who share in the life of Christ, people whom God has blessed so that they might be a blessing. God's blessing is available to anyone faithful enough to ask for it, including the good folks of this congregation. So, please ask for God's blessing if you haven't already. And when I open the service on a Sunday with a welcome to the saints, please know how glad I am to be talking to you. Amen.