

Clay-Footed Saints¹

St. Martin's Episcopal Church
All Saints Day, Sunday, November 3, 2019

The Baptist preacher Carlyle Marney once said that each of us is like a house. And in that house is a living room where we entertain ... and a dark basement where we store the trash. And he said that each house also has a balcony where all the folks gather who've inspired us along the way. These are our saints. And then he said, the way you celebrate All Saints Day is to step out onto the front lawn and salute those folks on your balcony. The saints in your life.

Well, what's it like to be a saint? What are we really singing about this morning? You know, this is one of my very favorite feast days. And the fact is that I've lost a few saints in my own life in recent years. So these questions are particularly dear to my heart today.

Now someone once said that to be a saint is to live with joy ... not happy, necessarily ... 'cause happiness just comes and goes, depending on whether your spouse just yelled at you at breakfast, whether you had more than five hours' sleep last night, whether you ate something for lunch that didn't quite sit right ... whether you just got downsized out of your job. I mean, happy just comes ... and maybe more often ... just goes.

So what's it mean then to be a joy-filled saint? Well, maybe the joy of sainthood means something like knowing that underneath it all, no matter how terrifying the dark, that underneath it all there's a real bond between one another ... and some deepest bond with the very Source of life itself. And I have a hunch that even if the word "saint" makes your skin crawl – even if the idea of being a saint leaves you stone cold ... maybe even so ... I think maybe it's saints that ... of all things ... you and I most want to be. 'Cause in the end, I think it's that deep joy that you're really after.

But too bad ... God knows you and I settle for less, most of the time. You know, you settle for money, you settle for recognition, you settle for power, you settle for lots of toys, you settle for security, you settle for the mad race of two incomes ... with no time left for a friend. But still ... even though you and I settle for less, I think underneath ... we really do long for joy ... for that communion at the heart of it all. True, looking in all the wrong places ... or as Fred Buechner puts it, "looking in all the damndest places!" But I think while you and I are looking in all those wrong places ... funny thing ... this joy at the heart of creation ... at the heart of it all, I think this Joy is lookin' for you and for me.

'Cause maybe God's ultimate purpose is to make us all really human, to make you and me what He calls us to be ... to make us one and all, into the saints of God. 'Cause I think you and I are really on a journey toward wholeness, a journey linked with those travelers before us and travelers who come after us ... and linked to those who travel beside us on our way ... moving toward some completion, some wholeness that's pulling you forward, beckoning you to travel on ... to persevere.

II

Well, here's a question: What's the journey like that you and I are on? And where are the saints on our journey?

In Anne Tyler's novel a few years back, *A Patchwork Planet*, the main character's name is Barnaby Gaitlin. Now Barnaby's been in a bit of trouble ever since he was a kid. But for eleven years now, Barnaby's been working steadily for a company called Rent-A-Back, renting his back to old folks and shut-ins who can't move their own porch furniture or bring the Christmas tree down from the attic. And in Tyler's wonderfully warm picture of Barnaby, she shows him as a clay-footed saint of sorts, doing extra favors for his elderly clients, worrying over them, doing extra odd jobs for free 'cause he knows there's need. ...

And in one scene that I particularly like, he and a co-worker, Martine, are cleaning out some old lady's attic ... dragging a heavy footlocker filled with old books out into a hallway headed for the basement, when Barnaby asks Martine, "Have you ever thought of changing jobs?"

"Why? Am I doin' something wrong?"

Barnaby says, "No I mean, doesn't this job kind of get you down? I mean, don't you think it's kind of a sad job?"

Martine straightened up from the footlocker to consider. She says, "Well ... I know once when I was taking Mrs. Gordoni to visit her dad. ... Did you ever meet her dad? He was in some kind of accident years ago and ended up with this weird condition where he doesn't have any short-term memory. I mean zilch? Doesn't remember from one minute to the next."

Barnaby says, "Oh, Lord."

Martine goes on: "So he's livin' in this special care facility? And I had to drive Mrs. Gordoni there once when her car broke down. And her dad gave her this big hello. ... But then when Mrs. Gordoni stepped out to speak to a nurse, he leaned over and asked, 'Do you happen to be acquainted with my daughter? She never visits! Can't think what's become of her!'

"That kind of got me down," says Martine. And Barnaby says, "Right. ... See what I mean?"

"But then," Martine went on – "You have to look on the other side of it."

"What other side, for God's sake?"

"Well, it's kind of encouraging that Mrs. Gordoni still comes, don't you think? I mean, she certainly didn't get credit for coming, beyond the very minute she was standing in her dad's sight. But just for that minute, her dad's happy. And not one instant longer. But Mrs. Gordoni goes even so, every day of the week."

"Well," Barnaby says. ... "Yeah, okay."

So yeah ... okay. Living saints. And they're everywhere. See the saint in the hospital emergency room, holding someone who's just learned that a spouse of 60 years has just died on the operating table. See the saint in the nursing home, talking to the frail ones who sit, mute and staring, in their wheelchair lineup along the hallway. See the saint in the high school kid who tutors kids or rehabs slum houses. See the saint in the guy who owns the auto repair shop where customers get an honest job at an honest price. See all the Barnabys of the world!

And thanks be to God ... see the "saint in the face of a forgiven sinner who meets you in your own bathroom mirror." And by God's power, by God, all ... all saints of sorts ... saints! – As well as sinners.

III

Well as someone's said, "There's no one here but us chickens," And so it's always been. A people busy and powerful, stupid, smart, ambivalent. ... Brave and sniveling, fearful and self-aware; folks who scheme and promote and deceive and conquer. Who pray for loved ones ... and long to flee misery for themselves and to just skip death if you please!

But nevertheless, I do believe we are all called to become saints. And I also believe that this call is God's doing, God's ultimate purpose ... to make all of us – you and me – truly human, "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

So here's my last question: How do you, how do I become that human being, become that saint?

A guy by the name of Alan Paton wrote a book on the life of Francis of Assisi called *Instrument of Thy Peace*. And he says he wrote it "for sinners, for those who with all their hearts wish to be better, wish to be purer, less selfish, more useful." He wrote it, in other words, for saints like you and me who sin.

And in that work, Paton went on to say that there are at least two things needed for the "sainthood" we celebrate today. And those two things are these:

First, never, never doubt that God can use you for God's purposes in this world, if you're willing to be used by God, no matter what your weaknesses. And second, see that God can also use for God's purposes any other person who's willing to be used, whatever his or her weaknesses.

These are God's saints ... God's holy humans used by God for some purpose of His own in this world. And in the process, we do become better humans – as the true saints we are called to be.

So finally, whether you give yourself an A or an F in the sainthood department, you cannot take back the humanity that God has given you and calls you to fulfill. 'Cause once you're baptized, you belong to God and all that remains to be seen is what you'll do about it.

And you know what? You don't have to do it alone either, since you have all this company. 'Cause on this day especially we're all gathered together in this one place, as someone put it, the "old saints with their sickles, and the baby saints in their diapers, passing one another on our way in and out of this world."

All these saints sitting right here to your right and to your left, all these saints you can see for yourself, and all those saints you can't ... all those saints in your life who've gone before you ... all of 'em cheering you on, calling your name, shouting their heads off with encouragement. Because you're part of them and they're part of you and all of us are knit together ... journeying from here to there all our life long ... for the love of God.

Live as the saint you are called to be. Because in the end ... I promise you ... in the end that is all that really matters.

Amen.

¹*Resources used: Anne Tyler's A Patchwork Planet (Random House, 1998); Barbara Brown Taylor's "God's Handkerchiefs"; Barbara Brown Taylor's "The Company of Heaven"; Frederick Buechner's "To Be a Saint."*