

All Saints
Calvary, Pittsburgh
November 2, 2008, 11 am

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What apparitions came to your doors on Friday night? My husband and I saw some interesting costumes on the street in New York – not children, but young men and women dressed up as rag dolls, elves, story book characters, a pirate, and some we didn't recognize. Lots of us have forgotten that those costumed folk are a backhanded way of remembering the saints. All Hallows' Eve is supposed to anticipate All Saints Day, even though our cultural celebrations of Halloween have tended to focus on the least holy rather than the most holy spirits among us.

So who are the saints? In the church we work with overlapping definitions and understandings – that saints are all the baptized, that they are the holiest examples of Christ-followers through the ages, and even more broadly, that the saints are those who show us God. The catechism reminds us that they are the whole family of God, living and dead, bound together in Christ. Episcopalians and other Christians wrestle with how broadly to understand the family of God, and whether non-Christians are included, for we can certainly point to holy examples who show us what God at work in the world looks like – people like the Dalai Lama and Mahatma Gandhi. It seems more fruitful to remember that Jesus' saving work was and is for the whole world, and that our baptismal promises are about living holy lives, together, in community.

But what we are doing here today, in baptizing these six very small persons, is consciously claiming them as saints of God. We say they are blessed in the sacrament of baptism, whether they know it or not. Our job, for new saints of any age, is to aid them on their journey closer to God. Once we baptize and anoint them, we will claim them as saints. We affirm that saintliness, holiness, blessedness is a state of being, rather than a list of accomplishments. If we can say that a small infant is a saint, then blessedness cannot really depend on the good deeds she or he has done. On the other hand, when we see blessedness in the life of another, then it's a pretty good indication that God is at work in that person's life, making him or her holy. We see signs of blessedness in the deeds of a saint.

So, saintliness has to be about both being and doing – both the blessing that is an inner state of being and the way in which that blessedness is expressed in the work of a life. That's really what Jesus is talking about in his list of blessed kinds of people: those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are meek and merciful and pure in heart. They are inner states of being that can be expressed in outward ways. That's actually what we say about sacraments – that they are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. Saints are meant to be sacraments of God in human lives – in the very same sense that Jesus is the ultimate sacrament of God in human flesh.

Look around you at the saints. They include the folks you *know* are saintly, and they include some don't like very much. One of my favorites in our calendar of saints is Jerome. He was a monk in the fifth century, who translated the Bible into Latin. He was also a famously grumpy and arrogant fellow who made life enormously difficult for the people around him. If there's hope for him, well, then there must be hope for each one of us.

The saints are as varied as the breadth of God's human creation, and they will be found on all sides of theological debates and political contests. Indeed, God gives us such varied opponents as blessings for our own journeys toward holiness. There are saints among the folk who voted to leave The Episcopal Church. There are saints among those who have clearly stayed. There are saints who haven't yet made up their minds. They are saints because they've been baptized into this fractious Body of Christ, and there are saints among them whose holiness of life is abundantly evident. We dishonor them and God when we refuse to see their blessedness.

Where have you seen a saint this week, other than in a Halloween costume? And even those in costume may be a reminder that we're meant to look beyond the surface, to seek the holy in the midst of the unholy.

I've been reminded of some little remembered saints this week, and the holiness evident in some mightily unholy circumstances. Patricia Hunter, who is a Baptist minister in Seattle, wrote a newspaper column to remind her community about four girls who died 45 years ago, when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed.ⁱ In the middle of the civil rights movement, four young women in Sunday School were murdered by some who objected to the color of their skin. They were gathering for prayers after a sermon titled, *The Love that Forgives*. We count them among the saints: Denise McNair, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Addie Mae Collins. Blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and blessed are the peacemakers.

Fred Morris was in the news this week as well. He served as a Methodist missionary in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s.ⁱⁱ He was a friend of Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, and both of them were human rights advocates and vocal critics of the military in Brazil in those years. Morris was kidnapped, tortured, and then thrown out of Brazil in 1974, primarily for his work with Dom Helder Camara. A couple of weeks ago, the government of Brazil formally apologized to him, and gave him a cash settlement and lifetime pension. Today Fred Morris lives in Panama, where he teaches children about caring for the earth.

Another saint was responsible for getting Fred Morris deported rather than disappeared. Richard Brown was a very junior embassy official in Brazil who had the courage to demand to see Morris under Geneva Convention rules. He significantly damaged his career by publicizing the torture and demanding Morris' release.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter (and do) all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Jesus, for your reward is great in heaven. Yes, the reward of the saints is great in heaven, and once in a while on this earth there *will* be healing and reconciliation when the saints do their work.

Saints are martyrs, living and dead, who are courageous witnesses to the love of God for all of humanity. Saints are those who are willing to stand up for what is right,

whether it is the dignity of basic human rights or our duty to care for an increasingly tortured earth. Saints are peacemakers and peace-bearers, those who dream and hope for a healed world, and work to make it happen.

Sainthood is not defined by holding particular theological positions or ecclesiastical positions. It is given in baptism, and it is evident in works of mercy, justice, and humility. It is not ours to grant, but it is ours to acknowledge. It is already given, and yet must be sought the rest of our lives. It is often most apparent in the midst of strife, and pain, and grief, for that is where the light of Christ is most urgently needed.

Where will you share that light with the world?

ⁱ Seattle Times: http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2008337461_hunter01m.html

ⁱⁱ *Christian Century* 4 November 2008, p8