

November 2, 2025
Luke 6:20-31

All Saints Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“To Be a Saint”

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Dr. Franklin Fry was one of the most respected pastors of his generation. He was held in such esteem that after his death a room was dedicated in his honour at the Philadelphia Seminary, and his congregation established a scholarship fund to assist students studying for ordained ministry. Dr. Fry was also known for his curious way that he participated in meetings, whether it be a committee meeting or a churchwide assembly. If you did not know him when you came into the room, you would think that he was completely distracted and disinterested; he would often sit at the edge of the room, either looking down or even reading the newspaper. What you would not realize is that he was listening to every word that was said, and at times he would make a statement that often shocked his fellow attendees. This happened at a gathering of synod pastors during my years in New Jersey; Dr. Fry was in his place reading The New York Times as pastors were engaging in a dialogue with the synod bishop. During one exchange, a pastor began his question with the statement, “I’m no saint” – at which point Dr. Fry spoke up in his booming voice that shook the entire room: “If you’re a Christian, you’re a saint!”

The entire room remained silent for a few moments because everyone realized that Dr. Fry was correct. We often think of saints only as people who are somehow holier and more righteous than ourselves; we think of saints as those who are immortalized in stained glass and who have churches, schools, and hospitals named after them. They are indeed saints; but saints are more than just those special people who seem somehow beyond the reach of an everyday Christian. Saints are all those who through Holy Baptism have been reborn children of God and proclaimed as God’s holy people. As we confess in the Apostles Creed, the holy catholic church is “the communion of saints”:

- “‘Christian church’ and ‘congregation of saints’ are one and the same thing. In other words: I believe that there is a holy group and a congregation made up only of saints. And you too are in this church; the Holy Spirit leads you into it through the preaching of the gospel. Formerly you knew nothing of Christ, but the Christian church proclaimed Christ to you. That is, I believe that there is a holy church which is a congregation in which there are nothing

but saints. Through the Christian church, that is, through its ministry you were sanctified; for the Holy Spirit uses its ministry in order to sanctify you. Otherwise you would never know and hear Christ.” – Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Catechism*, 1528.

While we still honour the saints of Holy Scripture and the early church with their own festival days and by naming institutions after them, on this All Saints Sunday we remember the saints we have known and loved, the saints who first introduced us to the Word of God and the Christian faith, the saints who were our mentors and role models and who are among “*the saints who from their labours rest.*” (ELW Hymn 422). We remember in worship those saints who have passed away in the past year as well as those saints who remain in our minds and hearts and who live on in the way in which we live as saints of our generation. As God was “*their rock, their fortress, and their might,*” we pray that God will also bless and strengthen us so that we might also be “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

It is indeed true that “if you’re a Christian you’re a saint,” but that does not mean that it is easy to be a saint. Jesus teaches those who would live as his followers, his holy people, what is required of them in today’s Gospel lesson from Luke in which he instructs his disciples on the standard for which every saint should strive. Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” is like Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” in many ways as both are teachings of our Lord to those who would be his followers. The sermon begins with the pronouncement of God’s blessings on these disciples; these Beatitudes declare God’s favour on the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. Unlike the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12), Luke’s Beatitudes include corresponding woes to those who do not live according to the Lord’s expectations. The blessings and woes are in four sets arranged in parallel fashion: poor-rich, hungry-full, weeping-laughing, and rejected-accepted. Jesus in this teaching is making the official proclamation of the way life will be inside and outside the reign of God. These are not suggestions about how to be happy or warnings lest one become miserable; “*blessings and woes as words of Jesus are to be heard with the assurance that God’s word is not empty.*” (Fred Craddock). Luke’s Beatitudes also differ from Matthew’s in that they speak in the second person rather than in the third person; both blessings and woes in Luke are anchored in the present, not as promises for the future. It is the fulfillment of the proclamation Jesus made after he read the words of the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue:

- “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ ... Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in you hearing.’” – 4:18-21.

Jesus’ teachings speak to real socioeconomic conditions rather than spiritual conditions or attitudes, and they declare God’s partisan commitment to the poor and the oppressed; they set forth “*Jesus’ bold vision of life and community that expresses the values and commitments of God’s reign.*” (John T. Carroll).

Jesus’ first beatitude declares that “*blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*” (6:20). The blessing of the poor neither idealizes nor glorifies poverty; it declares God’s prejudicial commitment to the poor. The coming of the Kingdom of God will bring a reversal of fortunes, as Jesus will teach in his parable on the rich man and Lazarus when “*the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham [while] the rich man died and was buried*” (16:22). One of the principal hallmarks of the Kingdom will be the redemption of the poor; they will be released from their degradation. Oppressed now, they will enjoy God’s blessings in the Kingdom; “*henceforth, God’s presence, advocacy, and redemptive work will be seen among the poor.*” (Alan Culpepper). Hunger and weeping as aspects of poverty that will be no more when the poor are fed in the presence of the Lord (“*For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.*” – Psalm 107:9). Laughter and joy will replace mourning and weeping, for “*those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves*” (Psalm 126:6).

The fourth beatitude speaks to the situation in the early church in which disciples will face hatred and persecution because of their faith and witness: “*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.*” (6:22). Those who were persecuted for their faith were assured by the apostle that “*if you are reviled in the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.*” (1 Peter 4:14). Reward is promised for those who are faithful to the Lord even when they are cast out and reviled; disciples may rejoice in their oppression because God’s favour is on those who are reviled:

- My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces

endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” – James 1:2-4.

As Jesus proclaims blessings on those who follow his teachings and live by his example, he also pronounces woes on those who reject his ways and choose other paths. As the blessings announce God’s favour, so the woes announce God’s judgment, which should be cause for grief and remorse among those who are judged. These woes pick up the theme of reversal from the Song of Mary (*Magnificat*), in which the mother of Our Lord speaks of the reversal that will accompany the fulfillment of God’s purposes in the birth of her son:

- “His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” – 1:50-53.

The rich are shortsighted and are lulled into a false sense of security when they think their present abundance ensures their future comfort; they are so apt to be preoccupied with their possessions that they fail to respond to God’s invitation. Because the kingdom of God means God’s vindication of the poor, it is nearly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom (*“Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”* – 18:25). Nevertheless, those who are rich, like Zacchaeus, can still repent; repentance for the rich means divesting themselves of wealth that encumbers a genuine dependence on God.

- “[Mary sings] for Gabriel, who first gave her the good news, and for all who will benefit from it – for the proud and powerful who will be relieved of their swelled heads, for the hungry who will be filled with good things, and for the rich who will be sent away empty so that they have room in them for more than money can buy.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The woe that Jesus pronounces on those *“who are laughing now”* (6:25) is not the result of a joyful response to God’s work. Instead, it is the laughter of the fool who is both unconcerned and unaware of the priorities of the kingdom (*“Come now, you rich people, wail for the miseries that are coming to you.”* – James 5:1). While a good reputation is desirable (*“None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem”* – Acts 5:13), when *“all speak well of you”* (6:26) it is either a sign of flattery accorded the rich or the popularity of false prophets:

- “An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule the prophets direct; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?” – Jeremiah 5:30-31.

The beatitudes and woes announce that the end is not yet, that when God establishes a just reign there will be a radical reversal in the fortunes of the rich and the poor. It is the call to discipleship from the one who sacrificed all for the sake of humanity so that in the Cross there might be the greatest blessing for all who follow our Saviour in his path:

- The fellowship of the beatitudes is the fellowship of the Crucified. With him it has lost all, and with him it has found all. From the cross there comes the call ‘blessed, blessed.’ With his own hand God wipes away the tears from the eyes of those who had mourned upon earth. He feeds the hungry at his banquet ... the echoes of this joy reach the little flock as it stands beneath the cross, and they hear Jesus saying: “Blessed are ye!” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The demands and expectations for those who would be saints as disciples of Christ are made more explicit when Jesus commands “*to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*” (6:27-28). There is no place in the Christian ethic for vengeance or retaliation; Jesus’ followers do not reciprocate, do not retaliate, and do not draw their behaviour patterns from those who would victimize them. Followers of Jesus may be victims, but they are not to regard themselves as such, being shaped and determined by the hostilities and abuse heaped on them. Rather, they are to take the initiative, but not by responding in kind: “*If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes your coat do not withhold even your shirt*” (6:29). Jesus is *not* commending passive resistance to abuse; instead, he advocates a nonviolent, non-retaliatory resistance that deflects public dishonour to those who mistreat another person. Those who are saints by virtue of being disciples of Christ “*are not to react but to act according to kingdom principles of love, forgiveness, and generosity.*” (Craddock).

- “Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist; he is a practical realist.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jesus concludes his teaching to his would-be disciples with the words known as the “Golden Rule”: “*Do to others as you would have them do to you*” (6:31). These

words are not only found in the Sermon on the Mount (*"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."* – Matthew 7:12) but also in writings as diverse as those in the Apocrypha and ancient Greek philosophers (*"I am thinking and planning for you just as I would do it for my own self."* Homer, *The Odyssey*). The universal embrace of this principle does not make it any less true or valid for those who would be disciples of Christ. *"Jesus' teachings to his disciples, therefore, call for imaginative, aggressive, but non-violent responses to the problems that have borne such bitter fruit in our own time."* (Culpepper).

On this All Saints' Sunday, we remember and give thanks for the saints in our lives who blessed us with your loving example of faithful discipleship and who now rest in the presence of our Lord. Hearing the names that will be read on this Sunday may bring back memories that are both joyful and sorrowful; we rejoice as we remember the wonderful times we shared, and saddened that they are gone from our sight and are no longer with us at dinner tables and times of celebration. But no matter how we feel on this day, we rejoice because as those who were proclaimed saints through the waters of Holy Baptism they now abide in the place our Lord prepares for all God's holy people, the place to which our Lord will one day gather all God's people where *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). As we remember these saints who now dwell in God's loving presence, we also consider what it means for us to be saints in our generation, what it means for us who have been born anew to a living hope and called by our Lord to *"let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16).

- "To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be humans. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint ... to be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and to weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews ... It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full." – Frederick Buechner.

Among the saints for whom I give thanks today and every day is Pastor Ken Ensminger, one of my great mentors and role models in ministry. I always remember Pastor Ken's assertion that there is a comma that does not belong in the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, that it should read *"the holy catholic church the communion of saints,"* because the Church of Jesus Christ is the communion of those who have

been made holy by our Lord and sent forth to shine the light of Christ's love before others. Dr. Fry was correct: if we are Christians, then we are saints!

Amen.