

All Saints' Sunday – November 5, 2006 Susan Flanders  
Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 44:1-10, 13-14, Matthew 5:1-12

Every year when All Saints' Sunday comes around, we hear a variety of things about saints, coming straight from our readings, prayers and hymns. They express an understanding of saints that is complex, if not downright confusing.

Saints are the great ones – known and praised for their excellence - remembered by the church on special feast days. Saints are also the unknown and unsung, who have left no special mark except perhaps with a few generations of family. All those saints, famous or not, have died, going before us into blessed memory, into God's house of many mansions. They are the illustrious, and they are the faithful departed, whose names we'll read later at the altar and all the rest whom we hold close in our hearts.

And then there are all of us, still alive – we are saints too! At least, at our best, we are patient and brave and true, doctors and soldiers and queens and priests, even those slain by a fierce wild beast in the beloved hymn ( 9:00 we'll hear later) (11:15 we sang earlier). The saints of God include all faithful people – sainthood is something we can all try for. Together we can sing “the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.”

We baptize babies – 3 this morning – into the blessed company, this great cloud of witnesses, including them as saints before their lives have even unfolded – so clearly sainthood isn't about achievement.

All these different ways of identifying saints! I've been wondering if there are common threads woven into the rich tapestry which is sainthood? I think perhaps today's Gospel, the well-known passage we call the Beatitudes, may suggest at least two ways of claiming the sainthood that is the heritage of all God's children.

The first way of embracing sainthood, and I know this is counterintuitive, is when we give up on relying solely on ourselves to guarantee our lives work out, instead of trusting in God's presence with us. Maybe the reason Jesus calls the meek and the poor in spirit and the merciful “blessed” is because these are the folk who are humble enough to know they need God's help. They acknowledge that on their own, they cannot ensure success, happiness and protection from life's difficulties and losses. Saints know that life is not putty in our hands – we need help.

At baptism, parents promise to raise their children with God's help and the support of a community – not all by themselves. Our spirits are poor unless nourished by reminders of God's love. We cannot be everything our children need, nor our spouses or our friends or our bosses or our employees. We need mercy to temper judgment; we need to accept the limits of our talents and resources, and that is all hard. It takes meekness rather than arrogance and total self-confidence, and most of us don't like being that vulnerable – being meek, needing help.

But Jesus calls this blessed! Blessed are you – meek, poor in spirit, mercy-loving! This suggests that sainthood has something to do with trusting in God's free love and grace instead of thinking we must earn this through our own craven strivings. We strive, of course, but we do it in response to God's acceptance, not in order to win it.

And it is surprising, amazing what, with God's help, we can do! Don't you know people who have surprised you with a kindness or a patience or a strength you didn't know they had? Haven't you sometimes surprised yourself in being more or better than you thought you could be? We indeed hunger and thirst for righteousness, and too often we just end up with self-righteousness and cold, pious pride instead. Blessed is our desire for God's help and our faith that it is there for us in our need.

So, saints trust in God to help them do what they do; they are not the sole authors of their goodness and accomplishment.

The second thing about sainthood that emerges for me in the passage from Matthew is about living in two places – the world as it is, and the world as it might be – the capacity to imagine what things might be like if God's will really were done here on earth. Saints face reality and dream of a better life, and in this too, they are blessed. Jesus speaks of mourners, of peacemakers, of the pure in heart, of people who withstand persecution. All of these are people with a vision, people who are willing to undertake change, who grieve over the brokenness of the world and long for something better.

Sainthood – the blessedness of which Jesus speaks here – is about doing our best and knowing we need help and asking for it. And, it's about directing our efforts beyond the status quo to a new world – to real peace, real justice, real care for the earth, real love of all our neighbors.

We give thanks for all those who have been blessed in these ways – grandmothers and fathers, and parents and teachers and friends and lovers – those who have inspired us, loved us, helped us – those who have died, those

whose lives still brighten our own. They are blessed, and so are we, by their lives. We hope and pray, as we baptize new babies into this blessed company, that they will share in this too – that they will grow up trusting in God’s power to sustain them and that they will have dreams and vision for their day of a world made new – the blessedness of hope in the future.

And, this week, in the fevered environment surrounding the elections, where sainthood seems the last characteristic any of us might expect to find – perhaps these ways of thinking about sainthood might prompt our consideration as we make our choices. Can we believe in God’s power to raise up and inspire leaders and equip them to serve faithfully in such troubled times? Can there really be new vision for our domestic and foreign policies? Can we trust that a new direction is possible, that there is a way out of war and better ways to address terrorism? Where is the humility and meekness to not always have to be right but to always be open to new possibility? Where is the passionate desire to chart a new course into a more promising future for these children we baptize? Hopefully these things are in us, the citizens – all of us called to be saints of God. But let us especially pray for this blessedness in those we will elect on Tuesday.

Let us, day in and day out, seek out that blessedness in ourselves and in everyone – all the saints. “For there’s not any reason, no not the least, why you shouldn’t be one, why I shouldn’t be one too! Thanks be to God! Amen.