

11-2-2008, All Saints Sunday A
Chapelwood UMC, Lake Jackson

Generations Past, Generations to Come
Matthew 5:1-12

Yesterday was All Saints Day. This is a holy day that we inherited from the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has special days to celebrate many different saints. But they also have one day to remember all the saints.

Now, of course, we have a different understanding of what a saint is than the Catholics. We look at the letters of Paul and see him speaking of all the members of the church as saints, not just some.

But, at the same time, if we are honest with ourselves, we would have to say that some of the saints of the church are more saintly than others. Of course, the word "saint" means someone who is holy. It comes from the same word that the word "sanctuary" comes from. A sanctuary is a holy place. A saint is a holy person. And some people are holier than others.

What does a saint look like? Well, in the Beatitudes, Jesus was describing saints.

When you look carefully at the Beatitudes, you see that Jesus is talking about people who are not happy with the way things are in this world and in themselves. They are so unhappy with the way things are that they are willing to accept all the trouble that goes with changing it and changing themselves.

What are they unhappy about? They see all the heartache and pain and suffering in this world and they know that most of it is totally unnecessary. The world is full of violence and destruction because people are willing to put up with it. Some even prefer it this way. And the truth is that every one of us is a part of the evil in this world.

So, the saints are poor in spirit. They are guilty of contributing to the sinfulness of this world. They know it, and they feel guilty about it. When they see so many people's lives being destroyed, they mourn for them. They hunger and thirst for righteousness in the world and in their own lives.

They are the meek, who have a vision of a world in which people want to serve one another, rather than fighting for power over each other. They are the pure in heart, who have no other agenda than for their neighbors to enjoy the goodness of life. They are the peacemakers, who long for the day when we all live in peaceful harmony with one another, with creation and with our Creator.

The saints are people who understand what God intends for this world to be when it is completed. They want that day to come so badly that they are willing to work for it, to push for it, even to fight for it. They know they will be ridiculed and rejected by the people who like the world just the way it is, thank you very much, because they have more than most and they don't want to take the chance of losing what they had just so that others could have better lives. These people have small souls. Being rejected by people with small souls doesn't matter to saints. They have to keep working for the day that God's kingdom on earth is finally completed.

Today, we are remembering the saints who spent their lives building the Kingdom.

Have you ever built a house? I've worked on a couple of Habitat for Humanity houses. I remember one I worked hard. Several crews had already done a lot of work. The foundation was laid. The exterior walls were in. The studs for the interior walls were in place. As I looked around, I could imagine what this house would look like when it was completed. I could envision a family living in this house and calling it their home.

That's the way it is when you are building the Kingdom. Christ has laid the foundations. Previous generations have done their part. We can almost see what it will look like when it is finished. Each of us comes in and does our part. We build on what others have done before us. We leave our work for others to complete after us.

Today, we celebrate the faithful workers in God's kingdom who have completed their tasks. They wore themselves out working for God. Now, they are resting. And they are watching. In the Book of Revelation we see them gathered around the throne of God, and they are asking, "How long, O Lord, how long?" They are asking how much longer it will be before those of us still here on earth complete what they have started.

You see, the final, great reward for their faithfulness will be when the Kingdom is completed and all the saints in heaven and on earth will gather together in this majestic and beautiful edifice which will be our eternal home.

They did their part. They worked hard. And now they are eager to enjoy the reward. They are looking at us and saying, "Come on, people, get on with it."

And God laughs and gives them a white robe and tells them to rest a little longer, until the full number of those who will sacrifice their lives for the Kingdom is completed. When the last saint drives the last finishing nail in the last board and daubs the last bit of paint to cover his work, God will shout from heaven, "It is finished," and all the saints in heaven and on earth will look at each other in amazement and joy, and say, "Yes! Finally, it is finished." And they will all rush into the great city they have built, looking around with awe and wonder, and high-fiving each other, thanking each other for faithfully doing his or her part, completing the work that each had done, knowing that none of them had built the whole thing by himself, but also knowing that the Kingdom would still be incomplete if each had not his or her part.

That will be a reward worth suffering for. In fact, it is the only reward worth sacrificing your life for.

The question is, Are you a saint? Or have you laid your hammer down and gone fishing? I'm not talking about taking a break. Everyone has to stop every now and then and go sit in the shade and drink some lemonade and let your body catch up. No, the question is, Have you thrown your tools into the bushes, not even bothering to remember where you threw them, because you don't ever intend to come back and pick them up again? Have you forgotten why we are here? Have you lost the vision?

I remember on one occasion working on a Habitat house. It was a hot day. They gave me a job to do that I didn't know how to do. (There's a lot about construction I don't know how to do.) I had been working at it for awhile, and I was tired and frustrated. I decided to take a break. I went over to the shade and started talking with some folks. I enjoyed that a lot more. I intended to get back out there on that slab and get back to work, but it never quite happened. I gave up on that job. When the house was finished a few weeks later, I didn't have the heart to go to the dedication. I hadn't done my part.

Are you determined to do all you can to build this Kingdom as quickly as you can? Can you see the saints in heaven waiting, trying to be patient, but yearning to enjoy the rewards of their labors? Can you see the hurting people around you saying, “How much longer before you complete your work and our suffering is brought to an end?” Can you see the generations to come saying, “Get as much done as you can, and we’ll take over from there? We’ll finish what you’ve started?”

It’s coming. The Kingdom is coming. It will be glorious when it is completed. And when it’s done, the saints will come marching home. The question is, “Will you be in that number, when the saints come marching in?”

If you wake up one day and say, “You know, I’ve got a pretty good life. Sure, there are a lot of problems in this world. But they really don’t affect me much. I guess I’m pretty much satisfied with things just like they are,” on that day you become one of the small souls. You are no longer a saint. You become an obstacle to the building of the Kingdom.

But, if you were willing to pay the price of building the Kingdom, if you are willing to feel the sadness and pain of the world as it is, the disappointment and discouragement of trying to make the world what it should be but doesn’t want to be, if you hunger and thirst for a world in which people treat each other right and don’t hurt one another, if you have nothing in your heart but desire to build a better world for all people, if you are willing to get between people who are fussing and fighting, knowing you will get it from both sides, in order to bring peace, if you are willing to be hated and rejected by those who like things just like they are, then you will be in that number when the saints come marching into the kingdom.

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