



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

You Are a Saint

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 1, 2009

All Saints' Sunday (Year B)

Isaiah 25:6-9

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*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-aged wines strained clear.*

*And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.*

*Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.*

*It will be said on that day,
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

When you heard that the saints would come marching into our sanctuary this morning on All Saints' Day, did you remember that you are included among that number? If you're like many folks I know, you are plagued with the thought that you can't possibly be one of the saints of God, because you happen to still be drawing breath.

Or perhaps you're like those who come with their all-too-painful litany of past lapses in judgment—a constant reminder to themselves and the world that they are no saints.

Or perhaps you're tempted to measure your life of faith and find it pitifully lacking when compared to the “real” saints whose stories you know. You are all too aware that you will never have a statue of yourself like the one on the point over-looking the blue Pacific waters and the rugged Malibu hills where I have spent the last 3 Januaries with my preaching group. “Sure, Saint Francis is a saint,” you may say, “but my life of faith is nothing when compared to his.”

I suspect some of you here today are familiar with the list of new words that have been created through common usage, and how certain “new” words are lifted up as “words of the year.” I have been trying for some time now to get a word into the running, but so far my suggestion isn’t gaining much traction—at least that I’m aware of. My word is *Kramered*. You have been *Kramered* when your life is suddenly defined by nothing other than your worst moment. Obviously, this refers to Michael Richards, the actor who portrayed Cosmo Kramer on *Seinfeld*. No longer is his life defined by that signature role or anything else—save his worst moment; no, he is the one who went “postal” (to use another former word of the year) during a stand-up routine. Any time he is remembered, that is what comes to mind. He has been *Kramered*.

Unfortunately, so have most of the people who gather in sanctuaries for All Saints’ Day this morning. Too often we fail to live out of our identity as God’s beloved children—as God’s holy and set apart people. We live as if we were never named by God to be saints in the midst of this world that God loves.

Just how we arrived at this place is a mystery best left unsolved. What interests me is helping people of faith reclaim their rightful place among God’s saints. After all, our most basic and foundational creeds grant us that identity. We “believe...in the communion of saints...,” we affirm, so why don’t we own that identity?

In her marvelous book about liturgical spirituality, Susan White suggests that “we learn in (worship) that our identity is grounded, not in our own attitude toward ourselves, but in God’s attitude toward us” (Susan J. White, *The Spirit of Worship: The Liturgical Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 38). She reflects on this a bit more by reminding us that “to be called ‘holy’ in the liturgy, even before we have ‘accomplished’ or ‘earned’ anything, establishes the baseline for our renewed sense of who we are as human beings” (Smith, 39) What this means, of course, is that our worship can enable the *Kramered* among us to see themselves in another way—as *sainted*.

That’s why we remember on this All Saints’ Sunday those from our community of faith who have died in the previous year. In focusing attention on these particular saints, we get a chance to overhear the same about our own lives. After all, our focus is never entirely upon the saints to begin with, but rather upon the grace and work of God through ordinary people whose lives yield to the shaping of the gospel and are directed toward God. As one worship resource puts it, “Whenever the theme of the communion of saints is celebrated, it is important to remember that all who are united with Christ, whether dead or alive, are saints (‘sanctified,’ made holy, to serve God) because—and only because—of the unmerited work of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (*The Worship Sourcebook*, (Published by The Calvin Institute of Worship, Faith Alive Christian Resources, and Baker Books, 2004), 748). As we sing it in the hymn, “the saints of God are just folk like me,” which means even the “greatest” saint is a sinner saved by grace.

Whenever I think about saints, I think of my grandmother, a faithful member of the Presbyterian Church in Buchanan County, VA until her death about six years ago. And when I think about her, I think back to her house placed on a small piece of ground between a steep mountain and Hwy. 460. In the upstairs hallway of that house, there was a vent that was covered by a wire grate that was designed to let the heat from below warm

the upstairs—at least a bit—during the cold winters.

As children, we grandkids used to look down at the table below us, watching the adults at the table and listening to their words. The familiar seemed different when viewed through the lens of that vent. Things weren't what they seemed. It all looked different.

Just over six years ago, when my grandmother died, I made my last visit to that house. I climbed those stairs once more, walked down the hallway, and then I crouched on the floor over that vent. And, for a moment at least, I heard again the sounds of people feasting at that table. It was in a real sense not just a looking back, but a looking forward to that day when all of God's people shall feast together in the kingdom of heaven. That vent became a lens of resurrection, enabling me to imagine a day of no more tears; of no more death; of no more dying.

Isaiah's announcement that God will wipe away the tears from all eyes and feed the people of Israel at the banquet table filled with rich foods and well-aged wines functions in the same way, offering them and us hope in the midst of all that threatens or hinders fullness of life.

In one of her psalms of lament, poet Ann Weems captures the emotions of many whose lives are marked by a defiant hope in the face of grief. It nicely echoes the banquet which Isaiah describes:

*I stand at your empty table, O Holy One, and ask to be fed.
But there is no bread, no wine, no priest.
Is there no one to minister to me?
Is there no place at the table for damaged hearts and scarred souls?
Do you not invite everyone who believes?
I believe.
O God, I believe.
In spite of an empty table, I believe.
In spite of those who laugh at me as I wait for you, I believe.
In spite of the evidence to the contrary that they scream in my face,
I will stand at your empty table,
and wait until you come,
your arms full of bread,
the wine splashing as you walk.
Come, O Holy One, and feed me."*

This is the hope of which Isaiah sang. That the promise is sure: God will come and save us. God will wipe away all tears from all eyes and there shall be no more sorrow or pain. Death and dying will pass away and God's promised life will be.

The people who heard Isaiah's song needed that news. They were a people who were languishing in despair, about to be decimated and sent into exile. For several chapters, Isaiah paints a bleak picture of a people whose eyes were filled with tears, who know all too well the pain of death. They are a people without hope who suddenly and unexpectedly hear a message they could have never imagined. Isaiah shouts to them: God's

preparing a table before you filled with the richest foods and purest wines. God will dry the tears from your eyes. God will swallow up death forever. It will be, shouts, Isaiah, because God has promised it will be.

That same promise sounds for us today—for all of the saints who are gathered in this sanctuary this morning—and you are among them. May the God who spreads a banquet before us fill us with abundant joy, and may we go forth from this place with a word of hope on our lips and a song of joy ringing in our hearts.