

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 5, 2023 (All Saints Sunday, Proper 26, Year A)

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 23:1-12

A word we are using a lot today is saint. What do we mean by that? What makes a person a saint?

In our Gospel today, Jesus has something to SAY about that. He says pretty clearly that being a saint has NOTHING to do with status or ranking or titles or authority.

Now, in a world that is BUILT on prestige and power, that's kind of tough hear. You can find OVERLY PROUD people in EVERY PROFESSION, and in EVERY FAITH.

I was amused to read about Frank B. Vardeman, a Presbyterian pastor in Tampa, Florida, who was using the word "pastoring" in something he was writing. But in the program he was using on his computer (Word Perfect), when he hit the spell check key, it said the word "pastoring" was unknown. The checker SUGGESTED the following alternatives:

- (a) pasturing, as in pasturing cattle
- (b) pestering, and
- (c) posturing.

After a good laugh, says Vardeman, he realized how true it is. Some pastors, like some laypeople, spend most of their hours either pasturing, pestering or posturing.

It reminds me of a certain conqueror who went to a Muslim holy man and said: "Mulla, all the great rulers of the past had honorific titles with the name of God in them: there was, for instance, God-Gifted, and God-Accepted, and so on. How about some such name for me?" The holy man said, "God FORBID."

Jesus said, "All who EXALT THEMSELVES will be HUMBLED, and all who HUMBLE themselves will be EXALTED."

I have some experience with that. I remember the day I was installed as pastor at my last church. After kneeling for the blessing from the Associate to the Bishop and the congregation, as I was trying to stand, my foot got caught in my alb, and I tripped, and I FELL – RIGHT to the floor. That was HUMBLING. My aunt, who was there for the occasion, and was sitting in the front row, joked out loud, "Oh Reggie, just stay down!" She knew my sense of humor, and knew I would just pop right back up with a flourish.

There was another experience I'll never forget. When I was in seminary, students were expected to participate in the daily chapel service, and MY turn to read the scriptures soon came. It was my first time speaking in front of all my classmates and professors. I was extremely nervous.

When I got up to speak, my mouth dried out. I got cotton mouth and the words didn't come out right. I was reading a passage that had the phrase "the city of God" in it, but when I read it, it came out "the shitty of God." Everyone collectively gasped. But it wasn't over, because that phrase came over and over again, and every time, I said, "the shitty of God, the shitty of God." Everyone smiled and politely kept their giggles to themselves, but I WAS MORTIFIED.

Afterwards, a kindly and beloved old professor came up to me. He said, "Reggie, you did well up there, but you forgot one thing. You forgot that we LOVE you." He meant that in worship, the people aren't an AUDIENCE CRITIQUING you; they're your FRIENDS who are ROOTING for you.

I tell that story now to every person he comes up here to read for the FIRST time. "Remember, we love you."

I share that story TODAY, because I think it says something about what it MEANS to be a saint. “All who exalt THEMSELVES will be HUMBLED, and all who HUMBLE themselves will be EXALTED.” We don’t exalt OURSELVES; we ARE exalted – by OTHERS. We hold each OTHER in the light.

You see, being a saint isn’t something you can claim for YOURSELF. It’s not something you can ATTAIN by ANYTHING you do or say. It’s not an accomplishment or an achievement. It’s not something you can earn. It’s ONLY something that OTHERS can see IN you. What KIND of PERSON ARE you? After you pass away, HOW will they REMEMBER you?

I want us to take a moment to think about that. Find a partner, and just for a minute, each of you share with the other, “What do I want people to remember ABOUT me? How do I want to BE REMEMBERED?”

*(Give them a couple minutes.)*

How will YOU be remembered? This is your legacy. What are you going to pass on to the ones YOU love? They won’t remember how SUCCESSFUL you were. They WON’T remember how big your house or how expensive your car, your wealth or your accomplishments. They WILL remember your kindness, your gentle spirit, your generous heart, your abiding faith. THAT’S what they’ll remember.

You are GOD’S saints. THAT’S your legacy. Not because you see it in YOURSELF, but because OTHERS see it IN you.

And because GOD has SAID so. As I look out at all of you, I SEE the saints of God. You may not FEEL like much of a saint, but it’s not ABOUT what YOU think. GOD’S opinion is the ONLY one that matters. We don’t GET to decide; GOD decides who the REAL saints are. And God’s mind is made up. YOU are God’s CHILDREN, MADE so in your BAPTISM.

So together, on this All Saints’ Sunday, in the memory and presence of those who have gone BEFORE you, in the promise of those who FOLLOW you, and in the HOPE of the faith we share, DEAR SAINTS, LIVE HOW you want to be remembered. LIVE your faith. LIVE for the GLORY of GOD.

Let us pray. O God, we give you thanks for ALL the saints – the great, the not so great, the courageous, the faithful, the bold ones, and even the timid ones – who loved you each in their own time and place and WAY, showing US the way to eternal life. May WE show others. Amen.

And amen.