

## Celebrating Saints

Isaiah 25: 6-9  
Hebrews 12: 1-4

In the Catholic and Episcopal churches, and the Eastern Orthodox denominations, there are a huge number of saints and revered dead mortals. The process for gaining sainthood or holy status seems to vary, but there are new saints getting the designation all the time.

There was a story in Friday's Star Banner about the Ocala visit by the remains of St. Maria Goretti. She is the youngest saint to be canonized, just 11 years old at her death in 1902. Her story: she was stabbed 14 times by an attacker in protecting her chastity. The killer was unrepentant for many years, but became repentant when Maria came to him in a dream, giving him flowers as a sign of peace and friendship. He asked for forgiveness from Maria's mother shortly after, and he was forgiven. For many years after that, he was a monastery gardener. Great story!

If you saw the story in the Star Banner, you likely saw the kids lined up so that they could go in and pay their respects. They looked thrilled. My wife, raised a good Catholic in Catholic schools in Queens, remembers as a little kid going somewhere to visit some saint in a similar setting. There is the ornate glass coffin with a waxy replica of the person inside. She remembers being utterly terrified and totally creeped out by the whole thing. I'm sure some of our local kids had the same experience.

Now we, Presbyterians, and our fellow Reformed church denominations don't have special saints. That seems a shame since the saints typically have a lot of color, good stories, and become identities reflecting different periods in the church's long history. It's also a great way to scare small children and scar them for life. Why don't Presbyterians share in this veneration of powerful figures of Christian history? Are we stiffs or something?

The answer lies within this morning's historic affirmation of faith drawn from the Scot's Confession. It's in that long last sentence in today's selection: *This Kirk [Scottish word for "church"] is catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the chosen of all ages, of all realms, nations, and tongues...It is therefore called the communion, not of profane persons, **but of saints**, who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, have the fruit of inestimable benefits, one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism.*

If you heard that correctly, you noticed that all of God's elect and chosen are to be known as "saints." We're all saints, in other words. We are all "holy ones," which is what the word "saints" derives – the Greek *hagios*. That isn't as fun as these dead notables in other Christian traditions, but it reminds us of our own tradition. We don't believe that any human being is special above others in any hierarchy. We do believe that all are sinners and have fallen short, requiring the grace of God for their salvation. Further, believing that God has already determined the elect or those chosen for salvation, and following John Calvin's principle of effectual calling, we believe that those who are the

elect, the chosen of God, are gathered in the church ... well, at least, for the most part. In the same vein, we also know that God is the singular Judge of all and that we do not have the mind of God. We only have the mind of John Calvin which was proven to fail at times, too.

Apart from Calvin's doctrinal musing, the "saint" or "holy one" is the one who lives out their faith in the grace and love of God and Christ. The saints are given no special powers and they bear no extraordinary gifts, apart from the faith that directs their lives. They have fears and doubts, insecurities and pain, tragedy and tumult, like all the rest of us. They experience times of being overwhelmed, of being angry, and of being depressed. But in the end, they have the promise given, that *God will wipe away every tear*.

With that, let's consider the passage from Isaiah 25. Here God is addressing his chosen people of that time and place. In the prophet Isaiah, a vision of blessing now follows an earlier pronouncement of harsh judgment on Israel and Judah. Even in vs. 2, the prophet describes the devastation of the city, and its sacred precincts on the holy mountain as reduced to "a heap of rubble." Yet as our passage begins, the holy mountain remains the place of God's choosing, a sacred place. Here God now would prepare "a rich feast for all peoples." The feast bears a table that has the finest that could possibly be enjoyed.

But there is more – a second part – as the words are repeated, "On this mountain...." Not only is there a sumptuous feast of the finest foods, but also an amazing action by our God. Referring to "the shroud that enfolds all peoples," and "the sheet that covers all nations," this blanket of darkness is revealed to be death as the prophet reveals how God will "swallow up death forever."

Death is swallowed up, **like it's the main course** in the wondrous feast that the Lord God consumes with his people. The appetizer is a soup of the tears of sadness together with a salad of tossed lives, crumbled bones, and crushed spirits of God's people. Then the entrée comes, barbecued death seasoned with vegetable medley of sin, fear and doubt, all to be consumed and transformed. The meal is topped off by a delicious slice of gracious blessing.

Notice also how Isaiah's vision relates death as a shroud that envelops each person, a veil that prevents the seeing and knowing of the other – the sister, the brother, as well as the image of the living God. We could go on quite a bit in exploring the imagery. At its foundation is the notion that sin and death together defeat the life-giving, life-empowering work of God and his kingdom.

Here, death is swallowed up, consumed and digested forever. Tears are wiped away from every face as life is given victory over death. The feast is about death and life. And friends, **death is on the menu** at this sacred feast in Isaiah's vision.

The saints are those who don't live under the penalty of death but who know that their salvation and the truth of their life is achieved by faith in their God and in the

promise of the Lord. They know that whatever comes along, *God will wipe away every tear*. That leads them to a spirit anchored in blessing, generosity, abundance and sharing. They aren't holding back. Rather they're stretched by faithfulness, out on precarious limbs, extending their reach far beyond anywhere they would have imagined. They don't concern themselves with the possibility of falling or failing, but focus solely on the faithful work of proceeding ahead, following the bold direction of the Holy Spirit. For they trust in that promise, *God will wipe away every tear*.

The passage from the letter to the Hebrews urges us to further consider the saints. The letter to the Hebrews is of unknown authorship, date, and purpose. Clearly, it seems to be written as a teaching document that makes the case for Jesus being the perfection of the Jewish tradition.

In the preceding chapter – 11 – the author recounts the many heroes of the Old Testament – the Hebrew scriptures – noting how greatly they suffered and endured in their service. The author emphasizes their determined faithfulness and called attention to how many were denied in this life, but how God's promise was ultimately fulfilled with the blessing of new life.

He uses this historical record to tell the disciples of his day that these faith heroes of the past provide an incredible witness to the power of faith and to the promise of God. Their model of steadfast faithfulness to the promise of God in the face of earthly trials and sufferings is presented to the disciples of Jesus to exhort them to remain committed in the same way. He writes: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Let us look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

The author of Hebrews finally sets Jesus before them as the ultimate model of faithfulness to the promise of God, writing: *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart*. It would seem that the writer's audience has experienced rejection, condemnation, and punishment. If they are Jews trying to continue their path and practice in Judaism, while also declaring their faith in Jesus as the Messiah from God, it should be no surprise that their Jewish neighbors would respond negatively. Simply having been identified as Jews and now identified as Christians and attending services at a house church in a metropolitan city like Rome would bring them castigation, suspicion, and reprisal. The author notes in other places how they've been described as beleaguered and doubt ridden about whether this was simply too difficult to be worth it.

The author of Hebrews echoes Isaiah's promise, that *God will wipe away every tear*. The life of faith is demanding when it is done with integrity and purpose. When the Kingdom and its contrary way to the world's ways collides with the power-that-be, whoever they may be, it will provide a continual struggle. That struggle amid episodes and cycles of conflict leave even the most faithful servant dispirited, doubtful, and drained.

Jesus remains the model for disciples in every age, even ours. The author of Hebrews reminds them that faithfulness to God and Kingdom is not likely to win friends and praise from the world. (If it does, you're not doing it right.) Scorn and contempt are only the beginning. They have not endured "to the point of shedding your blood."

By pointing to Jesus and the cross, the author of Hebrews reminds his audience not only of pain and suffering, but also Jesus' death. And in that death, there was resurrection, the swallowing of death as Isaiah described in the great feast of his vision. The powers of sin that war against the Kingdom and which would rob the promise of new life under the threats of pain, suffering, and death, are to have no power over the saints. God will "wipe away every tear" and bless the saints in their faithfulness.

As we celebrate the saints this morning, we should be reminded that their path in faith – *our* path in faith – is not founded on a worldly promise of popularity and success. On the contrary, it means sacrifice and enduring, upheld in a resilient spirituality that recognizes the faithfulness of God to Christ on the cross, and the promise of new life in the Lord.

The powers of sin in the world require steadfast witnesses of a deep faith in the sacred promise. Worldly trials come upon the saints in every age, but their victory and their promise abide in their faith in the promise of God, not in anything in the world. May the saints of every age, indeed the faithful today, join in "the cloud of witnesses" to render their praise to our loving and faithful God and to the promise of new life in Jesus Christ.