

Trinity 22 (2023)

“I sing a song of the saints of God. So begins a hymn that is dear to the heart of generations of Episcopalians.

Indeed, it sums up the message of All Saints’ Day, which we celebrated this past Wednesday.

Today is the 22nd Sunday after Trinity, but falling as it does within the octave (eight days) of All Saints’, it is right that we continue to “sing a song of the saints of God,” and so we are doing this morning.

But who are the saints? Is this title reserved only for the top ten percent in the class . . . those who have been given recognition by some church body . . . those who have a special day in the church calendar?

If you seek your answer from the Bible, the answer is no.

The apostle Paul founded a number of churches. Some had more problems than others. His most troubled church was at Corinth.

The people there were proud, divided, stuck on their own gifts, muddled over such things as the resurrection, the proper observance of the Lord's Supper and whether to eat meat offered to idols.

Yet, how does Paul open his first letter to them?

“Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints . . .**”

He would go on to chastise them for some very un-saint-like behavior. Yet that was their calling and is how he addresses them.

Saint – the word – comes from the Greek *hagios* . . . the same word from which we get

“holy.” It means – not perfect in every way – but “set apart”.

Saints are those who have responded to the call of the Gospel and who have been set aside for God’s service, as 1 Peter 2:9 makes clear:

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

“Peculiar” means special. They are not special for their own sake, so they can be little China figures in God’s celestial trophy’s case. Rather, they are special because they have been set apart for His service in the world.

So, if you have been united with Christ in faith and baptism. You are a saint . . . or at least called to be one.

I am going to come back to that thought in a minute, but before I do, I want to ask:

If all Christian are ‘saints’ in the New Testament sense, does that mean honoring those of especial piety is wrong?

I have been to conferences in Birmingham, Ala., at Beeson School of Divinity. The chapel there is a marvel to behold. It is a mini-St. Paul’s Cathedral, including a great central dome.

Painted around this dome on the inside are some of the great heroes of the faith. St. Paul from the New Testament is there. So is St. Augustine of Hippo from the early days of the Church. There are also a number from the time of the Reformation of the 16th century, including Thomas Cranmer, architect of our Book of Common Prayer.

Are we wrong to remember and celebrate these giants of the faith? Again, my answer

would be no. Just as it is not wrong nationally to remember such people as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Nathan Hale, Robert E. Lee, and Martin Luther King.

With that said, let's not draw the circle so small that we miss the point of the New Testament: The saints of God are all around us.

The little hymn I quoted earlier ends with these words:

“You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea; for the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too.”

But we don't want to be ordinary, run of the mill ones. And this brings us to this morning's Gospel.

One of the signs that we are indeed Kingdom people, people who are living our calling to be saints, is forgiveness.

And that quality is certainly in short supply in our world today.

One thing for certain is that in this present world there will be conflicts.

I once had a secretary who said: **“Putting two women in a room is like putting two tom cats in a croker sack: you are going to have a fight on your hands.”**

But conflict is not just confined to women. Put two people of either sex in a room . . . in an office . . . or anywhere you like . . . and over time there are going to be disagreements.

At times, these disagreements will escalate. This one does this or that or says something he or she ought not, makes a false assumption . . .

or maybe it is something he or she does not do that rankles the other.

Swords are drawn. Words are spoken. Relations are strained and friendships are torn asunder. Putting things back together is hard and at times never happens.

What I have said thus far relates more or less to minor disagreements, petty things. But not all disagreements are minor or petty. At times, people do things that are truly reprehensible. How is a saint to respond?

C. S. Lewis says perceptibly: **“We all agree forgiveness is a beautiful idea until we have to practice it.”** How true that is!

It is here Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question, **“Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?”** comes into play.

Peter, by the way, wasn't the first one to ask this question. It was one regularly discussed by the rabbis. The stock answer was three times.

So, when Peter suggests "seven times," he was, at least on the surface, being extravagantly generous.

But Jesus – as you will remember – instead of congratulating Peter on his generosity, raises the bar even higher. He says to seventy times seven, or 490 times, suggesting that there should be no limit to forgiveness.

Again, a beautiful idea, but totally impractical. Right?

Humanly speaking it would seem so. That is, until we take in the message of Jesus' parable, the parable of the two debtors.

Here Jesus redirects the focus from what we are to do to what God has done . . . has done for us.

That is what this business of the 10,000 talents (somewhere between 12 million and 1 billion in US dollars) is about.

It's an unpayable debt, yet the King wiped it off the books.

That is what God has done for us if we have come to Him in repentance and faith. He has wiped the slate clean. The old account has been settled. He has welcomed the prodigal home.

Think back in you own life of the mistakes you have made, times when you have done things you know are not in your best interest and contrary to God's revealed will.

Now, pictured a ledger sheet with the debit column full of figures. Then move to the bottom

of page and see the word “Canceled” written in big print.

The story could in fact end here. It would be the story of God’s extravagant mercy towards us. But it does not.

The same man to whom mercy was extended does the unthinkable. He corrals a man who owed him a debt which by comparison to what he owed the king was paltry and instead of forgiving him has him cast into jail.

It is here this forgiveness business about which we have been talking comes into play. We often act like that man who failed to show mercy. We want God’s forgiveness but are very stingy in meeting it out to others.

Before going any further, let’s look at what forgiving does not mean.

Do we mean when someone does something really hurtful or dastardly that it doesn't matter? Or, if it is possible, that no restitution should be paid.

Are we saying that if there is a civil penalty, that penalty must be set aside?

Are we saying that reconciliation is sure to follow?

No, on all counts. Forgiveness means opening the door . . . just as Jesus did on the cross when He cried out: "Father, forgive."

Did everyone who put Him there, everyone who shouted "Crucify him!" on Good Friday receive the benefit of his declaration of forgiveness?

No, but some did. Remember how Peter in his great sermon on Pentecost told his hearers: "You are guilty of the greatest crime in all of

history. You killed the Lord of glory, your messiah.”

What was their response? They were pricked in their hearts, and around 3000 came to Christian faith that day and were baptized. The benefit went to them.

Reconciliation is not automatic or universal. It takes a response. Our part is to follow Jesus in opening the door.

In so doing, we shall be set free from the gnawing tyranny of hatred and bitterness. Final judgment is placed where it belongs, in God’s hands.

Why is forgiving others so important?

Why does the Lord Prayer include the petition: **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us?”**

Think about breathing. Before I can breathe in, I must breathe out. So, it is with forgiveness. In order to breathe in God's fresh air of forgiveness and love, I must breathe out the old stale air of resentment and hate . . . anything like an unforgiving spirit.

Easy to do? No. Costly? Yes. Think of those dear souls in Charleston, S.C., a few years ago who went before the camera and forgave the crazed young man who opened fire in their church and killed a number of their members.

Their action left the media and the world at large scratching their heads. How did they do what they did? /// By following Jesus' words in this parable.

Could you and I have done what they did? I'm not sure, but if you and I are to be worthy of the word saint, we must try, God being our helper.