



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SAINTS MISBEHAVIN”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelations 7:9-17

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, November 1, 2009.

It's not every year that All Saints Day, which has been designated as November 1 since the 8th Century, actually falls on a Sunday. The last time this occurred was in 1998 and the next time will be in 2015. So it seemed a fitting year to reflect with you briefly about the significance of the day and the significance of saints themselves.

Let me begin by saying that among Protestants and Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians, there are vastly different conceptions of what constitutes sainthood and how the day itself should be celebrated. Much of the debate and discussion depends on where one stands when it comes to the venerable “sanctified” verses “justified” debate. Those who emphasis *sanctification* claim that some people get to be called saints because they act like saints and are recognized and be declared to be such by the church, after they have met certain requirements, one of which is having given evidence of the performance of a miracle of some kind. When they have immersed from a rather rigorous ecclesiastical screening process, the Pope names them a saint. Sometimes the Pope even “undeclares” some persons as saint. He may remove their name from the list of saints or remove their feast day from the liturgical calendar, like the popular Saint Christopher, whose plastic image used to grace many dashboards of cars. Or the Pope might declare a certain Saints Day optional, as was the case with the popular St. Nicholas. Both of these unpopular decisions were made back in 1969.

Other Christians, like us Presbyterians, don't emphasis sanctification so much as *justification* when it comes to sainthood. That is to say, saints are those who are justified (declared not guilty) by God through the sacrificial merits of Jesus Christ. *Sanctification*, on the other hand, is the process of becoming holy and for us this is a life long process that is never fully achieved on this side of the grave because we continue to struggle with sin around us and within us. But for those of us who emphasis *justification*, a saint is any Christian redeemed by Christ. Those who hold to this perspective on sainthood say that only God can make a person a saint and certainly not any church. And it certainly seems evident in the New Testament that the word for saints is used in reference to all Christians, to the redeemed community on earth and in heaven. And together these redeemed people are known as the communion of the saints. Many of the epistles in the New Testament are addressed to the saints of a particular community. And the passage we read this morning from Revelation 7 presents a symbolic image of the saints in heaven who have graduated from the church militant to the church triumphant and includes all of those who have claimed Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord during their earthly days.

Now, of course, the Protestants, the Orthodox and the Catholics all agree that the lives of the saints ought to be different in some way. They need not be sinless, but their lives ought to reflect the presence and the power of the risen Christ. That is to say, justification ought to lead to sanctification. Redemption ought to produce or encourage holiness. And so on this November 1 Sunday which we call All Saints Day, those who define saints as people who are sanctified may be looking back at the history of the church and celebrating those saints who have lived holy lives, who have provided examples, and who have left later generations with a church that can continue to serve God. And those

who view sainthood in terms of justification will be looking forward as well as backward and will focus on the continuing challenge to live as the saints of God as well as celebrating those saints who have gone before us into heaven having completed their Christian journey among us. They like to emphasize the all in All Saints Day and define a saint as anyone for whom Christ died which is a long list indeed. A complete celebration may join these two emphases. It will celebrate the history of those who have gone before and will also commission today's saints to recognize their saintly calling and to employ it in the service of Christ and his church.

The one thing I would discourage you from believing is that any of the saints, those who have a feast day or those who are simply a part of the redeemed have achieved their sainthood by their own efforts or faithfulness or by any kind of morale perfection or unblemished holiness. Saints are still sinners, sinners redeemed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and through the mercy of God the Father, but sinners nonetheless.

If you read about the lives of certain of the recognized saints, those whose names appear on the liturgical calendar or whose images grace stain glass windows in cathedrals and congregation around the world then you have to question the process of beatification and canonization. Some of these saints are down right weird and not necessarily models of holiness. Saint Leufredus (C. 738) struck a woman bald because she made fun of his own baldness, struck a thief toothless when he slandered him and struck infertile the fields of a farmer who had dared to plow on a Sunday.

Saint Brigid (C. 450-525) was seemingly out of touch with reality for she is reputed to have hung her laundry on sunbeams, to have taught a fox how to dance, and to have changed her bath water into beer so that the clergy could have something to drink. (I expected to get an Amen out of my fellow clergy here this morning for Saint Brigid!)

But at least Saint Brigid took a bath. Saint Jerome was said never to have bathed after he was baptized, claiming that he had been bathed in the blood of the lamb and that was sufficient.

Saint Callixtus of Rome, who died in 222, was an embezzler, a brawler, a twice convicted felon. And yet he was touched by grace, repented, became a priest and was eventually elected Pope, dying as martyr for the faith.

Time will not allow me to tell you the stories of some of the other saints, so called, but among them are con men, cut-throats, mistresses, exotic dancers and genocidal rulers who eventually elevated by the church to the status of saints.

Under consideration at present is one Jacque Fesch a wealthy French playboy and philanderer who committed a robbery and then shot and killed a Paris policeman who tried to arrest him. Fesch repented of his misdeeds and was converted to Christ while in prison prior to his execution by guillotine in 1957.

Now mind you, I don't doubt or question the conversion of any of these individuals nor would I even deny their sainthood, so long as we do not presume to believe that these redeemed sinners were necessarily more holy than others.

John Calvin, our theological forbearer whose 500th anniversary we are observing this year, chose to emphasize the reality of our common sainthood in Christ and the importance of persevering in the Christian life by ordinary, garden-variety Christians like you and me. And I have to admit that I think of saints I have known through out my life and ministry, the ones who immediately come to mind are not those who did miraculous or extraordinary things, but those who did ordinary things in an

extraordinary way or did so over many years, persevering despite the odds or the challenges or the routine or the weariness. They persevered. They kept on keeping on doing the best of things without fanfare or applause.

There was Saint Robert in my home church, who for a while was our next door neighbor, but he was more than that. He made a position for my mother and risked hiring her in his office while she was in the depth of depression, risking his own job with the county in the process. He befriended my father and shared a huge garden that they worked together. On occasion, when my father would not come home some evening and we feared that he was parked somewhere in his car with a bottle, Saint Robert would go and find him and bring him safely home. It was Saint Robert who was my Sunday School teacher for many years. While he was no scholar, no one had a bigger heart. And when the Session of the church had to vote on who would be allowed through the doors to worship with us back during the civil rights era, Saint Robert was among those who voted to open the doors, and not because it was what he wanted, but rather because he understood that this is what the Lord would want. Saints live for God and others.

In my first church as a pastor in Norfolk, Virginia there was Saint Nannie, who came to see me in my office one day in 1973. Crippled from polio, poor, a widow of many years, she scheduled a conference to talk to me about stewardship and tithing. You see, I had encouraged the Session to adopt a program that encouraged church members to strive to become tithers by giving 4% in the following year of 1974, 5% in 1975, and so forth so that by 1980 they could grow into tithers. I thought that Saint Nannie would find the challenge too demanding given her circumstances, but to the contrary she wanted to take me to task and wanted to know where in the Bible I read anything about 4%. You see Saint Nannie had been a tither all her life despite her circumstances and she expected this of herself and of any other Christian. Saints give sacrificially.

In my church in Vicksburg there was Saint John. He was still on the Session at age 90 when I arrived in 1976 but had to retire for health reasons soon thereafter. Five years later I would conduct his funeral service. But in the interim the Session had named him Elder Emeritus and Clerk Emeritus. And remember this the next time you feel you have done your duty or served your time in the church or on a committee. Saint John, this gentle and beloved bachelor and a banker in the Trust department, had been an elder in that church for 59 years. This was before there were compulsory term limits. You were an active elder for life. What is more Saint John had been Clerk of Session for 50 years and superintendent of the Sunday School for nearly 70 years. And though Saint John had no family or children of his own, he was beloved by one and all who went to see him in the superintendents office between Sunday School and church to get a piece of candy and a word of encouragement. Saints persevere!

In my former church in Tennessee there was Saint Pauline. Saint Pauline was crippled from rheumatoid arthritis for over 50 years but carried on an amazing telephone ministry from her wheelchair and eventually from her bedside. She was the right arm of every pastor who served that congregation. She counseled, she prayed, she encouraged, she laughed and loved with a great sense of humor and a gift of wit that betrayed her crippled little body. On several occasions she was recommended to the nominating committee for consideration as an Elder, but many people thought we should not place such an expectation on Pauline or make her leave her bedside to attend committee meetings or Session meetings. One year I encouraged the nominating committee to allow Pauline to make that decision for herself. She accepted the nomination and over the three years of her term she was the only elder in her class who never missed a single meeting. Saints don't focus on what they can't do; they focus on what they can do with God's help.

My friends, there are saints among us still and hopefully we are a part of that number. One will volunteer this week to teach 3rd & 4th Graders in Kirk Club. One will make a generous financial commitment toward the church's budget for 2010. One will sign up to work on the Habitat House after worship. One will serve meals at Crisis Ministry this week. One will deliver Meals on Wheels. One will demonstrate before his or her children what means to live a generous life. One will reach out to a family in crisis. One will agree to pray for people in need.

Susan Andrews, former Moderator of our General Assembly one told a story, a Sufi story that applies to Christians as much as Muslims.

“As he was praying, a holy man saw the crippled, the beggars and the beaten walk past him. In response he went down into deep prayer and cried “Great God how is it that a loving creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?” Finally, out of the long silence, God said, “I did do something about them. I made you.”

Sooner or later saints come to this same realization!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.