

“God’s Gift, Our Inheritance”  
October 30, 2016  
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church

Did you ever hear someone use the derisive comment, “Who does she think she is, God’s gift to the world?” That is exactly what we are talking about today, but not in a derisive way. This is the day we celebrate the gifts to the world that come from God’s saints.

We have some pretty definite ideas of what a saint is and we pretty sure that when we look up the word “saint” in the dictionary, it won’t be our own picture staring back at us. Historically, this holiday has been a sort of trifecta – a celebration requiring three days. They have been divided into All Hallows Eve or Halloween, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day. All Hallows Eve has been tied to some darker religious celebration associated with witchcraft and worship of the devil. In our time, it is pretty tame with the wearing of costumes, giving candy, throwing parties, and the occasional bit of mischief, like smashing pumpkins (not to be confused with the alternative rock band from Chicago!). In the early church, and still in the Roman Catholic Church to this day, a feast day started at sundown the day before and went to sundown the day of the feast. So, All Hallows Eve is really just All Saints Eve.

In order to teach the children and adults of her Episcopal parish about the three different days, the priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, started with an All Hallows Eve service and party. The instructions were to dress as one’s favorite saint. It mostly went according to plan. Of course, the John the Baptist look-alike came dressed as though after the beheading, carrying a gory, severed head on a silver platter, surrounded by fruit. St. Francis and St. Cecilia were there, as was St. Louis – the city, complete with a silver arch over her head and a sign that said “Gateway to the West.” Others were a far broader definition of saint, with two cowboys, a mother and son pirate team, and two Crayola crayons (one blue and one purple).

We roll All Saints’ and All Souls’ into one celebration in the United Methodist Church. In the Catholic and Episcopal Churches, they are separate celebrations. All Saints’ Day, for them, is a day when we remember the people we know, the official saints. For example, we remember St. Francis, Saint Benedict, and St. Peter. To be canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church, not only do you have to give evidence of leading a pious life, you also need to provide proof of three miracles to the Vatican following your death. Most of us do not feel up to that extreme level of sainthood. On the following day, November 2<sup>nd</sup> we celebrate the saints who are not universally known, like parents, Uncle Joe, or the old lady who lived down the block.

It is these people we talk about when, in the Great Thanksgiving for Communion, we say we “join with the angels and saints and all the company of heaven.” Our saints, known and unknown make up that company. They also get a brief mention in the end of the Apostle’s Creed when we say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” The company of heaven and the communion of saints are the same thing.

The Beatitudes, either as found in Matthew or Luke, are the gospel lesson for All Saints’ Day every year. It is a laundry list of good things to be – especially in the version found in Matthew. There we hear about the blessings heaped on the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, the meek, and many others. When we look at that list, we figure we can never be all those things, so we read it as a “nice” bit of scripture, but little else. The Luke version sounds less like who we want to be because it lists the “blessed” as people who are hungry, sad, and hated. The interesting thing about the Luke version is that it contains a set of “woe to you” phrases. Those who have it too good on the backs of others will see the tables turned on them. Woe to them! It is a call, not to a laundry list of rules, but to a way of life that looks out for others in the name of Christ

The saints are not people far-removed from us. In the early church, all the baptized were called saints. John Wesley claimed that, while baptism was a good thing and more than just something worth doing, it is not necessary to salvation. Saints are all who claim their place as children of God. We need to claim who we are and whose we are. That alone is not adequate. We are saints. We need to claim it. We need to act like it. Say it with me, “We are saints.”

The capacity for sainthood lies in all of us. The 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Karl Barth, said it is like a prisoner who receives a pardon. That person is imprisoned until they get up and walk out of the cell and into a new world. I like Barbara Brown Taylor’s example better. She said claiming our sainthood is like finding out there is a check in the next room that is made out in your name for a million dollars. It is yours, but until you claim it and cash it, you are as poor as you ever were. For us to exercise our sainthood, action is required.

In life, we are called *to* something. It is not enough for us to just go through life with no purpose. That reminds me of the old Scottish prayer that seems particularly appropriate to this season: “From ghoulies and ghosties / And long-leggedy beasties / And things that go bump in the night, / Good Lord, deliver us!” Sometimes we live with great purpose and other times, we are like the ghoulies, ghosties, and beasties, and just bump along through life. The writer of today’s reading from Ephesians reminds us that we are called to hope and to the glorious inheritance of the saints before us. We are offered “immeasurable power” as we live into the call God has made on us. We are individually called to make a difference in the world. We come together as the body of

Christ, the church, to do incredible things. We have sometimes hidden our sainthood rather than wearing it proudly.

Here in this place, our history goes back to one week before Wisconsin became a state – that is when this church was incorporated. There are amazing things that have taken place here. This church has been a leader in the community, but also a leader in Methodism in the entire state. The saints of the past were given the call to hope for a better world and they set about creating that world. They sat on committees and went to meetings. They also had big dreams that were made of many smaller dreams. When they built a building that had a silly looking spire that was jokingly referred to as “the needle,” members put a proper steeple on the church. When that building burned to the ground, they immediately set about building a new house of worship. This church has been added to repeatedly so that now we perhaps have more building than we currently need. How will we be stewards of this site for ministry and make it grow and thrive and continue to influence the community near and far? Can we grow this ministry to the place where we are using every bit of space we have? Is it possible that the work of the saints before us can energize us in ways that their gifts and our inheritance will grow our impact in Greater Milwaukee?

As you know, my dad has been in rehab at a nursing home in Florida. When he goes home, they will need to have help in the house. Mom made the comment, “I guess we’ll be spending some of your inheritance.” I wish they had spent lots more to enjoy these later years while they could. My inheritance from them comes in what they have instilled in me and that, from them, which continues to live and grow in me. It isn’t money. We have been given a grand inheritance here at Tosa Avenue by those who went before. The DNA of this congregation has a strong strain of reaching out to those in need. Works of justice and mercy are at the very heart of this congregation. God has gifted us in incredible ways and we have inherited much from the past. You are saints. Act like it!