

What Is a Saint?

Matthew 23:1-12

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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So, what happens in your mind and your heart when you hear the word “saint”?

Do you picture some person in a robe standing at heaven's pearly gates?

Or do you laugh because you know there is no one who really deserves that title?

Does someone quite saintly come to mind - someone who while very human was also the closest you've ever known to perfection?

Or do you remember that funeral you went to? The one where they ignored all the hard truths and only talked about the good stuff, even though reality is that the good stuff didn't make up much of that person's life?

When you hear the word “saint,” do you think in formal terms - connecting sainthood to a canonization process of the Catholic Church with a list of qualifications, including miracles? Do you distinguish “saints” - those whose goodness has given the traditional church reassurance of their place in heaven - from “souls” - those people who have died, whether or not traditional understandings result in confidence in their heavenly home?

Or, do you hear in your head the words made famous by singer Bob Carlisle who sang, “And the saints are just the sinners who fall down and get up”?

Honestly, I think we have a lot of baggage around the word “saint.” We are often quick to deny that title from ourselves or others. We are often unsure about if it is a word we should even use. We are often concerned about the integrity that is lacking in those who act like they should be honored as saints.

But this isn't a new conversation. It seems this dilemma has been around a long time...probably as long as human beings have existed. And, although the word “saint” isn't used, it is really the dilemma Jesus addresses in today's text.

Matthew tells us that this episode comes during the last week of Jesus' life. Over the course of that week the stress is increasing. Read the few chapters before today's scripture and you will see conflicts arising between Jesus and the religious authorities.

And because of that, too often we read stories such as this and we just dismiss those Jesus is in conflict with. We have become so familiar with words like “Pharisees” and “scribes” sending up red flags in our minds. In fact, at this point in history, that happens in a way that is dangerous both because it causes us to dismiss characters in these stories who are far more complex than like to we admit, and also because this reaction has numbed us to the ways that the language of our faith and scriptures contributes to antisemitism that is still experienced today.

So, we want to pause and notice what Jesus says in verses 2 and 3, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it” (Matthew 23:2-3a, NRSV). See, we often read right past this to the critique. But, remember, people are complex - then as they are now - and Jesus is intentional not to throw the baby out with the bathwater even as he critiques the ways they are teaching.

It is important that we remember that what Jesus is pushing back against isn’t something that is confined to Jewish leaders or Jewish people in general. While within this context the things Jesus critiques are connected to Jewish titles and practices, such as wearing phylacteries and fringed garments, the reality is that the truths of what Jesus is saying translate across time and space to all people and all places.

Perhaps this reading gives us some clues to how Jesus would answer a question about recognizing deeply faithful people. He might say, “Look for the ones who are serving rather than being served.” He might say, “Watch carefully because you won’t see the most faithful standing on a street corner, but instead behind the scenes or in the quiet places.” He might point us to the people whose words and actions are in sync with each other, who, in fact, don’t even need words to teach the ways of God.

And, while today we are remembering loved ones who have completed this life’s journey, this scripture can also point *us* to a more faithful future. Yes, the candles we lit may have come associated with the names of friends, of grandparents, of children, of spouses. But, the reality is that someday we will be those who are missed and remembered.

So, perhaps another invitation of All Saints Day is for us to ask questions about how we want to be remembered and how we can align our living to make that real.

Perhaps the saintliest among us are the very ones who are able to say, “Here’s how I failed...here’s how I will do better.” Perhaps they are those who upon hurting someone else know how to take responsibility and ask forgiveness.

Perhaps the saintliest among us are the ones who have learned that life is not about impressing others...the ones who have learned to be honest enough to check their own motives, to critique their own hypocrisy, ego, and selfishness...the ones who have

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learned to notice when their talk and their walk are out of alignment and to sync them up.

Perhaps the saintliest among us are the ones who serve quietly, who offer hospitality, who live generously, who love abundantly.

Perhaps the saintliest among us are the ones who would never imagine themselves as saints, who aren't striving for position or power, but who are simply doing their best to live as the hands and feet of Jesus in this world.

As we observe All Saints Sunday, we do so not with the intention to make a plan to guarantee our saintly status for some future generation. But, we do so reminded that how we live matters...that people *are* watching and learning from us...that living with faith means living with integrity.

So, maybe the question isn't how we achieve sainthood. Maybe instead the question is: how do we follow Jesus?

Where do your passions and gifts meet the needs of the world? And when you discover that point of intersection, what will you do to respond?

Where are the places in your life where you wish you lived differently? And when you name them, what will it take to change your living?

In what ways are your beliefs and your behaviors aligned? And in what ways are they incongruent? And what would it take to bring them more closely together?

As we pause today to remember, what are the qualities you most admire in those you are remembering? How can you reflect those qualities in your own life?

Perhaps today is not only a time to look back, but a time to look ahead...a time to become more fully the best of who God has created us to be...a time to embrace the possibility of more faithful living as together we strive to follow Jesus.