

Feast of All Saints
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Saints and Superheroes

Today is the Feast of All Saints, the day in the church year when we remember the saints of God, those known and unknown, those that we admire and those that scare us by their reckless devotion. *All* the saints. We remember their noble deeds, their witness, the way they gave their lives over to God.

The title “saint” is a peculiar one these days; it’s not a description that people much use today, except to refer to someone who is generous and caring to a fault, “he’s such a saint.” But real saints are not doormats. “Saint” is not a sentimental moniker for the meek and mild. In the Bible, “saints” refers to the faithful, believers in Christ, those who have answered God’s call, whom God has elected to share in his fellowship, in communion with Him. And that includes all the faithful, those in the past and those alive today.

Over the years, though, “saint” has taken on a more specialized meaning in the church. Depicted in paintings and in stained glass, for everyone to see, to literally look up to, the saints seemed larger than life, an elite group of super-pious men and women, heroes of the faith, a spiritual version of the Avengers. Such a view is unbiblical, and for this reason the Reformers rejected the veneration of saints as idolatry. That hasn’t stopped Protestants though from having our own *unofficial* pantheon of saints—Billy Graham, CS Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, even Martin Luther himself, paradoxically. Which suggests to me, the problem isn’t venerating saints, so much as what we venerate them for.

I mean, contrary to common portrayals, saints are not heroes. Heroes are people who stand out for their superior qualities. They are stronger or more courageous or smarter or more determined than most. And because of these qualities they are able to always save the day, making decisive interventions just at a moment when things are going badly wrong, when all might be lost. They are our leaders, our soldiers, our knights, our Superman and Captain America and Wonder Woman, folks who are always willing to sacrifice themselves in the fight, often in a literal battle, lest the forces of evil prevail.

As much as we tend to admire these heroes, saints are not like this. Whereas heroes are the center of the stories told about them, saints are part of a story in which God is the center. The saint can be almost invisible, easily missed, quickly forgotten. And whereas the hero’s story is always told to celebrate the virtues of the hero, the saint may well not have any such qualities. The saint may not be strong, brave, clever or opportunistic, but instead is faithful. A hero is moreover willing to sacrifice himself—perhaps even his life—for some cause, to make sure good wins, but the saint rests assured that Christ has already won the ultimately victory. And while a hero cannot fail, lest some great calamity occur, the saint expects to fail, and is not afraid to fail because she knows that repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration are needed. And where heroes stand out from the rest of society, saints depend upon their brothers and sisters in the faith community.

Saints in other words are not superhuman, not superior to normal folks like us. They do not possess an extra layer of muscle, stand taller, or sport superior IQs. They are flesh and blood, just like you and me, no stronger, no more intelligent. And that is the point. They are simply people who've offered themselves to God, knowing they are not the elite, fully aware that they are not up to the task, that their abilities are limited and fallible.

This appreciation of the ordinariness of saints is vividly expressed in the tapestries of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in LA. Lining the sanctuary walls, these enormous tapestries display familiar saints whose names we know, in a row, facing toward the altar, as if in line for communion. There is St. Nicholas, St. Gregory, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis, St. Clare...and on and on. But scattered among those saints are people without names – people you won't find in Butler's "Lives of the Saints." A teenage girl. A young man from the barrio. Children in modern clothes. It's not unusual for visitors, even the not-normally-emotional types, to weep at the sight of the figures. "They look normal...they look like us," they marvel. That is the point. The artist, John Nava, chose not to use highly stylized forms for the saints, but rather made them look like people we know today, that you might see walking around LA. Nava's desire was that people would see these saints, saints that look like them, and be moved to ask, If they can be holy, can't we all?

Fact is, if you take away the haloes, the saints are not especially impressive, a motley crew. Among the twelve Disciples, you've got a big-talking scaredy-cat (Simon Peter), two momma's boys (James and John), a tax-collector and zealot (it's a miracle those two ever got a long!), a traitor (Judas) and a cynic (Nathaniel), and all of them a bunch of whiners! Spreading the net wider, you've got a recovering hedonist (Augustine), a former prostitute (Mary of Egypt), a repentant murderess (Olga), and someone today whom we might consider a Middle Eastern terrorist (Paul). If *they* can be holy, can't we all?

Indeed, if the saints don't look any different from us, if they don't have any special abilities and if they have sordid pasts like us, what then makes them different? What makes them special?

What it comes down to, I reckon, is ambition. Now, that may sound strange, given how we have been taught as Christians to be suspicious of ambition. But that is to misunderstand the nature of ambition. You see, the opposite of ambition is not humility. It is sloth, passivity, timidity, and complacency. We sometimes like to comfort ourselves by imagining that the ambitious are prideful and arrogant, and those of us who never risk, who never aspire, never launch out into the deep are the truly virtuous ones. But this imagining is often just thin cover for a lack of courage, even laziness. Playing it safe isn't humble, it's lazy, it's fearful. No, what's spiritually dangerous is not ambition, but rather what it's aimed at, what it is we aspire to.

For, there are many things to aim for in this life—wealth, fame, domination over others, beauty, knowledge, even simply being well-thought of. But nearly every one of these goals will end in disappointment, in dissatisfaction. Still we chase after them, we are ambitious for them, oblivious to the fact that when our aim hugs the earth, when it settles on attention from others or domination over them, then we are aiming too low.

But what if we turn our attention elsewhere? What if we raised our sights, aimed our ambition higher? What if we desired to be not simply respected or influential or attractive or financially secure, but to be holy? What if we were ambitious not for getting ahead but instead for godliness?

That was the question put to Thomas Merton. Shortly after he converted to Catholicism in the late 1930s, Merton was walking the streets of New York with his friend, Robert Lax. Lax was Jewish, and he asked Merton what he wanted to be, now that he was Catholic. "I don't know," Merton replied, adding simply that he wanted to be a good Catholic. Lax stopped him in his tracks. "What you *should* say," he told him, "is that you want to be a saint!" Merton was dumbfounded. "How do you expect me to become a saint?" Lax answered: "All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one. Don't you believe that God will make you what He created you to be, if you will consent to let him do it? All you have to do is desire it." Thomas Merton knew his friend was right, and he went on to become one of the great spiritual thinkers and writers of the last century. His friend Bob Lax would later convert to Catholicism himself -- and begin his own journey to try and be a saint.

The challenge Lax made to Merton, "all you have to do to be a saint is to desire it," rings down through the decades to all of us today, because it speaks so simply and profoundly to our calling as Christians. If we only want to be average, run-of-the-mill Christians, it's not hard. Everyone can do just enough to get by. But the message Christ sends to all of us is an invitation to be something more. In the words of the old Army recruiting ad: "be all that you can be." And what we can be is a saint.

But as Lax acknowledged, it is God who can make us saints, make us holy. Sure, we have to put forward the effort, but our becoming saints is up to God, something that God makes happen. It is God who takes otherwise ordinary women and men and decks us out in the work clothes of a thousand vocations: nurses, teachers, preachers and reformers, musicians and monastics, evangelists, peace-makers and those persecuted for their faith. He takes all these callings and adorns them with holy love.

That any of us should become saints happens not simply because we want it, but because God desires it, for his purposes, for his glory. You see, the point of being a saint isn't to be a spiritually superior person; the point is to point to God. A saint is someone whose life manages to be more than a "cranny through which the infinite peeps," as the preacher Tom Long puts it. Saints show us a glimmer of God in this world, a bit of God's uncreated light refracted through men and women, just as sunlight has to be refracted in stained glass in order to be seen.

The author Frederick Buechner offers an even more alluring characterization: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints."

Such exemplars, such flirtation devices are more important than ever today, where people are celebrated not for anything they do, but are simply famous for being famous. Such celebrities fit right in in a culture as narcissistic as ours, for they affirm our basest, most shallow desires and don't ask anything of us except our attention. By contrast, those who do great things, who live

outstanding lives, who embody grace and faith, these folks make implicit demands of us. They challenge us, by offering a different model of how to live.

Brian Doyle tells of a couple who gave birth to a child with no limbs. When the baby was born, they freaked out; they just couldn't accept such a child. But the labor and delivery nurse and her husband were happy and eager to take the child home. They adopted her, and said she was "the best kid ever." After she died at age 8, they adopted more special needs children. Doyle remarked, with awe, "There really are people like that on this planet."

There are, and our world needs more of them—not more prosperity, more entertaining distractions, not more technology, or better health, but more saints, more men and women who let God's light in, who give witness to the possibility of a graced existence in this world. The presence of such people among us makes us wonder, If *they* can be holy, can't we all? If they can be 'children of God,' if they can be blessed, if they can know the love of God, can't we all?

Fact is, all of us are capable of being saints. We don't have to be average, overlooked or left behind. We can be glorious, sharing in the borrowed glory of God. As CS Lewis cautioned: "It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which you would be strongly tempted to worship... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." We are all potential saints.

I recognize that all this saint-talk can seem somewhat off-putting as it is probably not something that many of us have ever thought about, much less desired. And yet part of the reason we celebrate the Feast of All Saints is to be reminded that there is something more than the existence we know here on earth. There is a quality of life that transcends the here and now, that is so full of God and heaven that it bleeds over into this world. Such people who exhibit this kind of life every day are called saints. And the more we get to know them, the more we wonder, if they can be saints, can't we all? Indeed, we can. Thanks be to God!