

Saints—Under Construction

The culture which surrounds us now is very different from that I grew up with in Cabarrus county—I imagine Gaston county then was much the same environment that I knew then. The last day of October was recognized as Halloween and children went Trick or Treating in the neighborhood where they lived. There was no recognition of it at church, not a lot of spooky decorations around the neighborhoods. Although by the time my children were growing there was a Fall Festival on a Saturday close to that date, with costumes and fun and games. But it was not a major event nor was it identified as Halloween. The following day—November 1st—All Saints Day was not mentioned at all—not at church, not at school, it just didn't register as a date set aside to recognize anything special. My understanding of who and what saints were about was very one dimensional—saints were those who were martyred for their faith. Saints were people that those in the Roman Catholic Church honored—or maybe in my lack of knowledge—maybe they were worshiped. Saints were from the distant past. I thought that we Protestant Presbyterians didn't have saints. Of course, there are many Protestant churches which have Saint within their name, but not many around where and when I was growing up. Sainthood was something of an enigma—a mysterious concept that had little or nothing to do with my life. It never occurred to me that I might know one—or perhaps, someday be trying to become one. Yet in many ways, that is what God and the church desire for us. Now that's a thought, isn't it? The expansion of this concept for me began when in seminary it was pointed out to me that the word martyr—A Greek word—had undergone a significant change in meaning during the early history of the church of Jesus Christ. The Greek word simply means witness. Now the Standard English dictionary defines a martyr as someone who chooses to suffer or die for a cause. In doing that, one does witness to the importance of that cause. Within its original usage there were no dire or deadly associations with the word. To be a martyr was simply to witness to something. So if a martyr in the biblical sense is a witness, we are all called to be martyrs. So biblically speaking what is a saint? In the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul, when Paul addresses letters back to the communities of believers he has established, his opening salutation is often “to all the saints in....” That indicates that in the early church, sainthood was not connected to an institutional process evaluating the life so someone extraordinary. If we think, with Paul, it becomes obvious that we all have saints—saints who are deceased and those who are living and walking among us. The word saint then is not limited to the “greats” of history. For Paul and other New Testament writers use the term synonymously with believers, those who are following the Way of Jesus of Nazareth their risen Lord. In scripture, the ones who are called saints are those who are known for their faith and their service to God—their witness. They are people living out their faith as a vocation of worship, praise and service. In today's gospel passage we read the beginning of what is called the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the portion known as the Beatitudes. In this passage Jesus is giving us a picture of what would describe human beings if they were living lives as God envisions them to do. That is a picture that is illusive and a state that is unobtainable for us, yet if we look to scripture we can imagine it. We can imagine what human society living according to God's will and purpose could look like. The entire Sermon on the Mount paints a picture of the imagined kingdom of Heaven. It's an ideal scenario of the final

reality, that perfection of time and place where God's love reigns over all, that teleological consummation in which Divine goodness rules. The twelve verses I read begin naming as blessed those who embody a long list of nearly impossible virtues. The ethic that Jesus lays out in this sermon portrays moral completed-ness, even perfection. It sets an ethical bar that looms so high over our very human heads that it looks impossible to surmount. Truthfully, it is impossible. But the issue is, you have to have a picture, an ideal in your mind—held in your imagination if you are going to reach for it. Chapter 5, which begins with the Beatitudes, ends with this summation: "Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect." The word usually translated as "perfect" in Greek also means completed. That would make the goal we are striving for to be completion—to be what God intends. Now like perfection, it's a goal that we are not going to achieve. We are not going to be either perfect or completed, at least not in this life. But the point is, you have to be able to imagine where you are supposed to be headed in order to head in that direction. As we recognized Reformation Sunday last week, I found this piece in something written by Martin Luther. It says, "This life...is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being, but becoming...We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road." It is this understanding that we are not perfect and can never be in this life which we must also keep in mind when we consider sainthood. If you fail to hold in your imagination the reality that you are not yet completed, then you do not know or acknowledge that you personally need some "construction work" in your life. No moral or spiritual renovation is ever going to happen if you don't think you need it. I have seen a bumper sticker—you can find some great theological statements on them—the bumper sticker said "Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet." God is not only eternally faithful, but is also eternally persistent in the call and claim that is made on our lives to turn toward living as claimed children. We are the saints of Christ, not because we are completed, but because we are becoming, we are on the road, we are under construction, moving toward the goal of being who and what God planned for us to be. Because we are becoming, we gather and confess that the process is ongoing. Because we believe that in faith we are on that journey, in the Protestant church we do have saints. We name those who have deceased as "saints" because although not one of them was perfect, but was under construction till the day they died, they were headed in the right direction. We can dare to call ourselves, indeed, all the faithful, saints, in this sense because we are all under construction—holding in our imagination what God desires of us. So as the body of Christ, we are saints who are called to be martyrs, witnessing to the light which guides us, demonstrating the process of becoming that we strive for, acknowledging being under construction as we do our best to come nearer to who and what God desires for us, to reflect in our thoughts and actions the image we Jesus placed before us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.