

## **November 5, 2017 – Blessed Saints (and Sinners)**

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

So what happened on Tuesday evening this week... does anyone remember?  
*(wait for response... 6<sup>th</sup> game of World Series, truck attack in NYC earlier that day, Hallowe'en)* All kinds of things were happening in the world, but for most of us, Tuesday evening was all about candy and children dressed in costume saying, "Trick or Treat." It was, of course, Hallowe'en also known as All Hallows Eve or All Saints Eve - the evening before All Saint's Day.

We don't usually have services on Wednesdays, so we are celebrating All Saint's Sunday instead. On this day of remembrance we may want to begin by asking ourselves, "What is a saint? What does it mean to say that someone is a saint?" How would you answer that question?" *(wait for answers – a person of great holiness, an exceptionally good person, someone who has been canonized by the Roman Catholic church)* If we were a Roman Catholic parish, we would celebrate All Saint's Day by remembering the many saints who have been given that designation by the Catholic Church. Those canonized saints include Jesus' disciples, the martyrs of the early Christian church and the many historic figures who have been canonized over the centuries. It's interesting to note that, since his election four years ago, Pope Francis has already canonized 42 saints, including two of his predecessors. The number of saints just keeps getting larger.

But the United Church of Canada doesn't give out this particular honour so what do we do on All Saint's Sunday? Well, we typically use this day to remember all those from our families, our congregation and the wider church who have died. It is a day to honour those who have gone before us, those members of our families who first came to Canada, the faithful who built this United Church of ours, the ministers who inspired us, the people who taught us in Sunday School, our parents, our grandparents and our godparents. It is a time to remember those who have died and to give thanks.

These ancestors in our faith are sometimes referred to as the "communion of saints ". In fact when I perform a committal service at a graveside, I often say the words,

We do this with the assurance  
that this person has already gone  
peacefully into that abiding place prepared for us,  
gently into God's deeper presence, and  
confidently into that communion of saints surrounding us all.

So how confident would you be about entering that communion? Do you think you belong with the other saints? Do you think those who have gone before you in your family or in this church are a part of that group? How would we know, what standard could we use?

One yard stick we could consider would be The Beatitudes, today's scripture reading. This excerpt from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is a list of blessings. In his sermon Jesus told his followers that God blesses those who are meek, those who are poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who mourn,

those who show mercy, those whose hearts are clean, those who work for peace and those who are persecuted because of their struggle for justice.

I don't think that Jesus ever meant this list to be a set of commandments, but it is still useful to consider how many of us are able to see ourselves in that list.

Some of us may be grieving, some of us may be gentle in character, some may be doing what they can to work for peace and others may be poor in spirit and thus seeking a deeper connection with God. But very few of us would be able to truthfully claim that our hearts are clean or that we have been persecuted because of our struggle for justice. I know that I'm not usually perceived as meek and my hunger and thirst for justice is often too easily satisfied.

The reality is that most of us are going to struggle to see ourselves clearly in this list. And that's OK, because none of us are perfect and neither were the saints that the Roman Catholic Church canonized. You see they were all human just like you and me. We know that Jesus' disciples and the leaders of the early church struggled in their ministry. Saint Peter denied Jesus three times, Saint Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus before he became one himself, Saint Augustine was a womanizer, and the list goes on. These leaders in the church, these members of the communion of saints, were, of course, sinners too. The good news is that the Ground of our Being does not expect or need perfection. God's love is unconditional, God's blessing is available to all of us.

There's a Lutheran church in the United States that was started by a priest named Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia wanted to stress this good news of God's

unconditional love and blessing, and so she named her church “House for all Sinners and Saints.” <http://houseforall.org/> How do you think that name would go over in Swift Current?

It might be a little hard to swallow, but it does highlight the fact that we are both saints and sinners. We are here today because we want to live more fulfilling and meaningful lives. We are here today because we want to belong to a community that is striving to transform people’s lives so that we can make a difference in the world. We are here today because we believe that through the power of the Holy Mystery healing and transformation is possible for ourselves and for our world.

Yes, we are not perfect. We are wonderful, flawed people just like the saints and sinners that went before us. The people we are remembering today didn’t embody the Beatitudes perfectly either. But that didn’t stop them from trying. We remember them with gratitude because, in their own way, they worked to make this world a better place. They shared their love with their families and with their community and they made a difference.

So on this All Saint’s Sunday let us give thanks for a God who is the essence of love, a Spirit that sees us for who we are and loves us unconditionally, a Holy Mystery that continues to bless us throughout our lives and beyond, a Higher Power that uses us to make a difference in the world. And let us give thanks for all those saints and sinners who have gone before us . Let us remember them as we centre ourselves and prepare for the choir' blessed gift of music.