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“For All the Saints: From Abraham to Zacchaeus”

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All Saints Sunday (Year C)

November 3, 2013

Hebrews 12:1-2; Luke 19:1-10

Today we commemorate All Saints Day. Today we acknowledge with gratitude those who have gone before us and in ways grand and foundational as well as tender and quiet – have brought knowledge and wisdom, have displayed courage and creativity, have taught kindness and justice, have revealed beauty and goodness, have sowed seeds of hope and understanding – to the end that life is fuller and better for the human family.

It is important to note that the word “saint” has distinct and varying meanings among different parts of the Christian church. For those in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities, the definition of a saint is restricted to one who demonstrates an exceptional degree of holiness, sanctity and virtue. In those communities, the title “saint” is conferred after death upon those good folk who successfully go through the rigorous canonization process. Not many make it.

For Presbyterians and many other Protestants, the word “saint” has a broader definition. It refers to anyone of faith, anyone whose belief and action and life is founded upon the reality of God as revealed in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. You don’t have to be dead to be a saint in the Presbyterian Church! You don’t really have to be all that good either! The folks down the pew and across the room are saints!

We have that understanding because the Apostle Paul, in writing his many letters, addressed as “saints” the people to whom he wrote. Paul always refers to the community as “saints” rather than to an individual as a “saint.”

“To all the saints in Philippi”

“To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints”

“To the church that is in Corinth, called to be saints”

“To the saints who are in Ephesus”

Paul wasn’t writing letters to the dead. He was addressing living, vital, problematic, challenging, imperfect human beings! And he chose to call them saints! Perhaps by calling them saints, it gave them something to live in to, something to live up to. Perhaps it could do the same for us.

It is in the Christian scripture of Hebrews, the eleventh and twelfth chapters, where the writer recalls the great deeds of faith by the saints in another era: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, Moses, Rahab and Gideon and Samuel and David.

And the writer concludes by painting a remarkable and powerful scene.

These faithful women and men from another time and era gather to watch and cheer us on as we run our race. They may stand on a distant shore, but they are witnesses to the remarkable goodness and love and grace of God in this world and in this life. And the writer of Hebrews says their witness can spur saints of today forward.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and hindrance that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

All Saints Day reminds us that we are not in this life alone; we are not left on our own. There is One who animates and gives meaning to our lives, and there are others who have blazed the trails of faith and challenge and hardship because this One was present.

When Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah, he fled and complained to the Lord, “The people have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” God had to remind Elijah that he was not alone, and that indeed 7,000 more, in addition to Elijah, remained faithful to the covenant.

A great hymn of this day is one we will sing at the conclusion of the service: “For All the Saints.” It is not merely for some of the saints we rejoice, nor is it for the really good ones that we honor. It isn’t the most significant or important or impactful. We sing and we celebrate for *all* the saints because from the greatest to the least, from the most courageous to the most banal, God has chosen to number all of us among God’s children.

Our Gospel text focuses on one of the lesser saints in terms of quality of character as well as size who would come alphabetically at the end of the list. Zacchaeus was a wee little man, as the children’s song goes. He was vertically challenged – but more significantly, he was morally and socially challenged. Zacchaeus could not be blamed for his physical stature, but his other deficits were all his own doing.

The text doesn’t reveal much about Zacchaeus, but it does say he was the chief tax collector in Jericho. A tax collector is not popular anywhere, but it was particularly onerous in Palestine in that day. The tax collector was indigenous to the population of that location, but he served the interests of an oppressive external power and foreign government.

To gain the position of tax collector, one had to purchase the franchise or inherit it from the family. And it was a profitable franchise. Jericho was a sizable town.

In all of Greek literature, this text is the only one that has been found that uses the term “chief tax collector.”

Zacchaeus is the head honcho of a significant franchise. He was an entrepreneur. He was shrewd and opportunistic. He did not create the Roman occupation, but he

did take advantage of it in order to prosper. Rome had given them lemons, so Zacchaeus made lemonade and sold it to his fellow citizens.

The society around him did not see what he did as a legitimate business – they saw him as a collaborator with the enemy and living off the misery of his own people. Zacchaeus enriched himself at the expense of his brothers and sisters. As one commentator points out, “In a corrupt system the loftier one’s position, the greater one’s complicity in that system... no one can be privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons.” (*Luke*, Interpretation Series Commentary, Fred Craddock, p. 218)

And Zacchaeus paid a price socially and culturally and religiously for his success. He was unwelcome among his own people.

We do not know what motivated Zacchaeus to seek out Jesus. Jesus did have a reputation for welcoming into his presence those on the sidelines of society: the intensely poor, the physically fragile, the social pariah. Perhaps Zacchaeus heard rumors that Jesus befriended tax collectors and harlots and sinners. When your reputation hits that level, who doesn’t need a friend?

So Zacchaeus scampers up a tree to get a glimpse of the visiting rabbi. When I picture this in my imagination, Danny DeVito comes to mind! It must have been a comic scene because it caught Jesus’ attention. An older man, clearly wealthy – instead of being on the front row of the reception committee, he is perched behind the crowd and in a tree!

“Come down from there,” Jesus tells him, “for I must stay with you tonight.”

Prominent religious figures know better than that. You are sending the wrong message! When it comes time for the annual budget campaign, people will remember what you did. We need to be inclusive, but we do have our limits and our morals to uphold.

And out of nowhere, Zacchaeus responds: “Half my wealth I give to the poor; and those I have defrauded, I will repay four fold as the Torah requires.”

Sometimes an invitation is more than a social opportunity. Sometimes an encounter is more than a mere meeting. Sometimes acknowledgement is opening the door to life.

Don't ever belittle the power to set people free by saying hello, by connecting, by establishing relationships.

Jesus says, "Here is another son of Abraham. Salvation has come to this house today."

It is true that Zacchaeus was restored in the act of inclusion and repentance and restitution that took place. Yet it wasn't merely Zacchaeus and his household that benefited. It was Abraham's household; it was the community of Jericho and the human family that benefited because the poor would be given some relief and those cheated would be repaid.

In such encounters, justice and mercy embrace, righteousness and peace kiss (Psalm 85).

The alphabet of faith is not complete if it does not run from A to Z, from Abraham to Zacchaeus. That is what Jesus reminds us.

Every community has similar stories. Durham certainly does. For good reason, Duke was known as "the plantation" among some members of this community. Tobacco, raised on the back of the poor and oppressed, built many of the institutions within this town and provided the wealth that fueled many enterprises, including religious ones like First Presbyterian Church.

The use of those funds for charitable or educational or medical purposes does not excuse nor exonerate the oppression of human life in that day. There is no such thing as private righteousness among high officials who participated in and profited from enterprises that robbed and crushed other persons.

The wrong must be righted, justice must be done, restitution must be offered. It is then that charitable purposes for education, community development, medical service, and religious training for all God's children can bear fruit.

And it is then that all the saints – problematic and challenging and imperfect as they may be – people named Zacchaeus and Duke and Mark and Rahab and Martin, all can be celebrated and named among the saints.

Not because any of us are so good – but because God is good.

Amen.