

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18, Luke 6:20-31

Good morning saints! Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. We celebrate that through the Holy Spirit, all of us are saints, part of the body of Christ and bound together in a communion, a fellowship that includes the living and the dead in heaven and earth. All of us who are part of that body are saints, holy women and holy men, set apart as sacred with God's help. We celebrate today that through baptism two brand new baby saints, Evie and Colby, will be welcomed into the fellowship. All of us who witness the baptism will be asked this question: "Will you support these persons in their life in Christ?" Our answer will be: "we will," and we will then have to help Evie and Colby understand what we have gotten them into, what it means to be a saint in the household of God.

Of course there are saints and there are Saints. There have been some very special women and men who exemplified what it means to be holy through their witness, service, and often sacrifice. Who knows whether God will call Evie and Colby to be like a St. Mary or a St. Peter, a St. Francis or a St. Clare. If God blesses them with such extraordinary grace, their families and friends will probably wonder what's wrong with them! Saints have often been misunderstood. Most of us are more ordinary saints, living our our holiness in less dramatic but still powerful ways.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke this morning, Jesus instructs his disciples, his band of ordinary followers, in the ways of sainthood. Blessed are you poor, Jesus says, for yours in the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you when people hate you. Further on, Jesus talks about loving enemies and praying for abusers. If you are struck on one cheek offer the other. If someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt as well. If someone takes your goods, do not ask for them back. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Wow...the life of a saint sounds pretty rough. Is this really what we've gotten ourselves into? How will we explain this to Colby and Evie?

Well there was that last part about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. That's pretty easy to understand. The golden rule, right? Be nice and others will be nice to you. Be good and you can expect good things in return. For many Christians, this is their understanding of what it means to be an ordinary saint: Be nice. Be good. And while there is nothing bad about being good, being good is only a part of sainthood. Saints are not just good. Saints are holy. Saints are not just nice. Saints are compassionate, generous, self-sacrificing, and loving to the point that it can change the world.

"Be nice. Be good." though is the what many Christians seem to think is the core of the faith. All we have to do is lead a good life and then we can go to heaven. In the last few years a study was done about the faith of Christian teenagers in the United States. It was called the National Study of Youth and Religion, and it looked at the beliefs of teens across seven denominations and found some common trends. When asked questions about what they believe, most of the teens in the study said something along these five lines: 1. God exists and God created the world and watches over life on earth. 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself. 4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem. 5. Good people go to heaven when they die. Nothing about love or forgiveness. Very little about relationship with God or what it means to be one of God's beloved children. Nothing about community with other believers, much less reconciliation or giving. My guess is that American teens are not alone in professing a faith that the authors of the study call, "Moralistic, therapeutic, deism." Such a faith emphasizes being good (moralistic), feeling happy (therapeutic), and believing in a god (deism). No wonder mainline churches are declining. You don't need a church to be good, feel happy and believe in a god. Somewhere along the line what it means to be a Christian has been watered down. Christian belief has been reduced to

something that can be summed up on a bumper sticker. Our children are telling us something here. We need to do a better job of telling the story. Jesus did not die on the cross and rise again so that we could be good, feel happy, and believe in God. The apostles, martyrs, and saints did not suffer and die for their faith so that generations yet to come would believe that God is only involved in our lives when there is a problem that needs to be solved. There is more to life as a saint in the body of Christ than being happy and good so that we can go to heaven. Life with God is deeper than moralistic, therapeutic, deism. A holy life, a sacred life, a life in the communion of saints is richer and more powerful. Being a part of this holy family means that even when we are not good, we can be forgiven and transformed. Even when we do not feel happy, God's grace has the power to give us strength and courage to carry on. We believe in a God who yearns to guide us into love and truth and peace, not a God who simply wants to fix our problems.

It is no surprise to hear that Christians have been teaching a watered down version of the true faith. The true faith is difficult stuff. Jesus may have scared the disciples when he taught them about being blessed by poverty, hunger, sadness, and so on. He may have scared the disciples when he said they should love their enemies. It is a lot easier to teach a bland version of the golden rule than it is to explain how to live out what Jesus is really talking about. So we give thanks on All Saints for all the ordinary and extraordinary saints who help us see a deeper, more powerful faith. We are part of a communion, a blessed association, where saints past and saints present, saints really holy and saints trying-by-the-skin-of-their-teeth-with-God's-help to be holy can help us live the Christian story beyond: "be good, feel happy, and believe in God." Here is one real-life example that I heard which sent me back to this morning's lesson from Luke's Gospel. I wonder if the man in the story had heard it. His name is Julio Diaz. Some of you may have heard this broadcast on the radio a couple of years ago. Mr. Diaz is a 30-something social worker who lives in the Bronx, New York. Every night he gets off the subway one stop early so that he can eat at his favorite diner. One cold, February evening he was walking toward the stairs out of the subway station when a teenage boy approached him, pulled out a knife, and demanded his money. Without hesitation, Diaz took out his wallet and gave it to the boy. As the teenager was walking away, Diaz called after him, "Hey, you forgot something. If you're going to be robbing people for the rest of the night, you might as well take my coat to keep you warm." The boy robber was confused. "Why are you doing this?" he wanted to know. Diaz replied, "If you're willing to risk your freedom for a few dollars then I guess you must really need the money. I was on my way to get some dinner and if you want to join me, you'd be more than welcome." So Mr. Diaz and the teen went to the diner and sat in a booth together. Diaz was a regular, and so everyone in the place greeted him, even the dishwashers. The boy was astonished that people would actually teach each other with such respect. Then the the bill came. Diaz said to the boy, "I guess you're going to have to pay for this bill since you have my money and I can't pay for it. But if you give me my wallet back, I'll be glad to treat you." The boy immediately returned the wallet. Diaz also gave him \$20 but asked for something in return: the boy's knife, which he handed over. I don't know where the story went from there, but later Diaz said this: "If you treat people right, you can only hope that they treat you right."

There's that golden rule again. But Mr. Julio Diaz took it to a whole other level. I do not know if he is a Christian, but I hope he is. We need more Christians like him, ordinary saints who bear an extraordinary witness. If someone takes your wallet, give them your coat as well. Communion can happen when we dare to share a meal with a stranger. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you: not just to be nice or good, not just to go to heaven, but to change a broken world with God's help. We will not all be as courageous or perhaps as foolish as Mr. Diaz. But God offers more for us than just being good and being nice. God made us good, but God calls us to be holy, saints set apart for God's amazing purposes. As we support Evie and Colby in their baptism, in their life in Christ, as we raise our children, and teach our youth about being Christians, as we support each other, God help us to be holy, to be ordinary saints with extraordinary lives, following Jesus Christ our Lord.