

Ephesians 1:15-23
All Saints Sunday
November 4, 2007

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

On Friday I attended a luncheon at Southwestern University in Georgetown, where I (and a few other distinguished ones here) attended college. It was the first annual clergy alumni gathering, and I was honored to be the inaugural speaker. It's always very hard to know what to say to a bunch of preachers, but I decided to turn it into a testimony. I talked about what a gift that school has been in my life, and how it, hand in hand with the church, has formed me. And I found myself reflecting on all the shoulders on which I stand and all the different lives that have contributed to my life—a very appropriate theme for All Saints.

Saints can be living or dead, and there are many definitions of the word. In Paul's writing and the life of the early church, the word "saint" referred to all Christians. Today in our common usage, a saint is anyone we think acts in a patient, loving way, especially when they have good reason not to. In between, saints included martyrs who gave their lives for the faith, as well as people whom the Roman Catholic Church deemed to have a special relationship with God, shown through miracles and a holy life. Saints in that tradition are seen as intercessors with God on behalf of the living, ones who pray for the rest of us from their position in heaven.

In each of these cases, a saint is a person who shows the world a little sliver of what God looks like. It doesn't mean they get it all correct; it doesn't mean they know everything. It means they are open, at least in part, to letting themselves be a

channel, a window, a vessel, where the nature of God's goodness can be revealed to the world. They do this in many ways, but I've thought of four that I want to tell you about: Saints look for God to show up; they give of themselves in some selfless way; saints build a corner of the kingdom; they tell us they love us; and they make sure there's a church to pass down to the next generation. I want to tell you the stories of some saints, in whom we see these five activities. I really wish we had time for you all tell your stories too. Each name you will speak today carries a story with it; of this I'm sure.

I'll begin with the kind of saint you see in old church paintings and statues. I first learned about this kind of saint through my father's mother, Evelina Maria Calles, from Tucson, Arizona. She was raised in a close-knit Mexican American community. The women in that community at some point began to revere Saint Jude, known in the church as the patron saint of lost causes, part of my heritage, I guess. The ladies in her circle of friends got together every year on St. Jude's feast day, October 28, to feed each other, drink a little, tell tales, and—get this—play poker. Grandma was divorced in 1941 and excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, but the rest of her life she continued to pray to St. Jude. 40 and 50 years after Grandma had moved away, she would send flowers to her friends in Tucson, as a sign of her friendship and her desire to be present.

My grandma had an exotic mystique about her, and a way that reminded me of a Mexican movie star. Her devotion to the church and to St. Jude was always part of that mystique for me. She practiced her Catholic faith in concrete ways that I could see;

she wore the St. Jude medal and burned the candles and prayed in the little chapel off the side of the cathedral. We Methodists do not pray to saints nor see them as mediators between us and God—Jesus is that for us. But Grandma’s acts of devotion always served as a sign for me; they pointed my attention upward and outward, to hope in the possibility of what amazing thing God might do. In her own way, Grandma looked for God to show up, and she taught me to do the same.

For the next saint, we move to South Africa. I received a story from a missionary recently, of a young boy named Thobani, who was orphaned, homeless, and desperately ill with tuberculosis of the stomach, as well as other infections due to HIV/AIDS. When he was 18 months old, he weighed a mere ten pounds. His prognosis was not good.

There was a woman named Grace who agreed to take Thobani in and make him part of her family. It was touch and go for this little boy for one long year, but Grace (who was aptly named) saved his little life through her graciousness, simply by loving him. She was part of a ministry of Pinetown Methodist Church, which serves poor communities through teaching, resources and support. Grace was both a caregiver and a bead worker with that program. Grace herself eventually became seriously ill with HIV/AIDS. She did not let this deter her and continued to take children in crisis into her home.

Grace was a mother to everyone and encouraged those who had given up hope to learn to do beadwork, to grow vegetables, or to join the caregiver support group. As time passed, Grace's health deteriorated, but she would often be seen with Thobani or

other sick children, walking to the bus at 3 o'clock in the morning, to make sure they were first in line when the clinics opened. Grace was finally led home to perfect rest and peace with her Lord, but her legacy of graciousness lives on in that ministry, saving others simply by loving them, with every day they are given. Saints give of themselves in selfless ways (Glenda Howieson, Hallelujah Moment, gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=4676).

Saints also build a corner of the kingdom, and I can think of no better builder than Joe Spears, whose life we celebrated in worship yesterday. We read from the second chapter of James, where it says, "faith without works is dead," because this was a one sentence summary of Joe's attitude. In true Methodist tradition, he believed that faith should result in action, getting things done, building things and building up people. So we have as his legacy not only the little wooden house he built for the playground, but also the lives of so many people who love him, especially all the kids we heard about in his service yesterday. We see a glimpse of the kingdom in the work of his hands, where the last and the little ones are lifted up, where community is formed, and where the grace of Christ finds concrete expression.

The next saint is another member of our family, Jackie House, mother of Jeana Fulfer, who died on Thursday. Tim and Jeana cared for Jackie, whom they called Babydoll, for a year in their home. It's been consuming, to be sure, but I know Jeana would say it's been a rich and priceless gift. Babydoll was a sweet, kind presence with them, always content and glad to greet each new day. Jeana told me she'd been walking a couple of days before, thinking about her mom and how there is no way to

sum up in words a person's life. Yet we still try, and Jeana said it occurred to her that for her mother there was actually one word: Love. Her whole life, Jeana said, Babydoll lived out of love and taught Jeana to do the same. Always love, Jeana said.

It may be that this is what tugs at us so when we remember the saints. For love is what our hearts need and yearn for; it's what touches us at our deepest spot. Love comes through people, but it comes first from God. Saints tell us they love us, and that's how many of us first learn a little of what God looks like.

And finally, saints make sure there is a church to pass down to the next generation. We receive this gift every time we celebrate Holy Communion, as the one of the oldest practices of the people of Christ. We receive the church passed down when we read scripture and sing hymns. We receive this gift when send our children to Sunday school and when we walk into this room. I saw a beautiful expression yesterday in Joe's service of the work of the saints in this place—you who have been here a while have worked and sacrificed and looked ahead, and most importantly, you have loved each other. You have been saints of God, and you have made sure there was a church to pass down to others.

We are now in a new space, and we include new people. And we, together, are the next generation of that brand of saints. We have ensured the presence of the church by committing our financial gifts in gratitude to God. We've said it's important to us that this community of faith continue to be here, not to maintain itself, not to maintain the building for its own sake, but to serve the world and to speak love and grace and good news to people who are yearning for it.

The cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints from every place and every time, will surround us as we gather at the table today. May the eyes of our hearts be enlightened, that we may see the hope to which God has called us. And may we live as God's saints, looking, giving, building and loving, being the church.

Deaths since All Saints 2006

Jay Koonce
March 2007

Maryneal Hammonds
April 2007

Curtis Kelly
June 2007

Patsy Glenn
August 14, 2007

Joe Spears
October 31, 2007