

Solemnity of All Saints: “Living Out of This World”

Matthew 5: 1-12 – The Beatitudes

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I remember as a child staring at all of the statues of the saints in the parish church where I grew up. The statue of St. Francis of Assisi holding a skull scared me. The statue of the Infant of Prague made me smile as I reflected on Jesus once being a kid too. And then there was the statue of Mary where so many of the adults stopped to pray before lighting a candle. As a child, this was so mysterious and awe inspiring.

This sense of other-worldliness was reinforced by the sisters who taught in our school. I grew up hearing the stories of martyrs being put to death for their faith, the great missionary saints like St. Patrick and St. Boniface who brought the Christian faith to pagan nations, and those great contemplatives like St. Theresa of Avila and St. Clare of Assisi who entered monasteries and spent hours each day in prayer. I even remember the story of St. Simon the Stylite who lived in the desert on top of a pole for 20 years to get away from the world and to literally be closer to God!

While I treasure all of these memories of my Catholic upbringing, at times it made the idea of becoming a saint seem almost impossible for me. As a child, saints seemed to have super-human powers that I knew I did not have. But as St. Paul says, “When I was a child I thought like a child, acted like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put childish ways aside, (1Cor 13:11).” My adult understanding of saints is much more balanced and holiness seems much more possible to me now.

The Greek word for “saint” is *hagios*, which means “holy,” “set apart,” or “other than.” St. Paul often calls the early Christian communities the “saints,” not because they have reached perfection, but rather because they are acting differently from the rest of the world, while at the same time living in the midst of the world. The Second Vatican Council’s document, *Gaudium et spes*, said it this way, “The Church is called to be in the world, but not of the world.” This is what it means to be “set apart”, “other than”, “holy”— to be a saint.

Today’s gospel, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, lays out the way Jesus’ followers are called to be “different” and “set apart” from the rest of the world, while still living in the midst of the world. Matthew frames the story in a way that his Hebrew audience readily sees the parallel between Moses giving the commandments to the Israelites and Jesus presenting the “new law” as the fulfillment of Moses and the prophets in a new and radical way.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus surprising his listeners by praising those who are poor, lowly, mourning, thirsting for justice, pure, merciful and persecuted. These are not the kind of people the world usually looks up to. Rather the world tends to admire rich, famous, powerful people who do what they want to get what they want out of life. But Jesus says it is the *anawim*, “the little ones,” who will inherit the earth, receive mercy, and enter the Kingdom of God. These are the ones who live “pure” lives. Undivided lives. Lives focused on eternal riches that will not spoil or end when the world is over.

The sermon goes on to include other ways Jesus’ followers are called to be different than the rest of the world. They not only should not commit murder, they should not grow angry with their brother or sister (*Mt 5: 21-22*). They should not only avoid adultery; they should avoid lust (*5:27-28*). Rather than demand an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth, they are to turn the other cheek (*5: 38-39*), love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (*5:44*). “This will prove you are sons and daughters of your heavenly Father, (*Mt 5:45*).” By acting differently than the rest of the world, you will show the love of God resides within you. The maxim from the Book of Leviticus, “Be holy as I your God am holy,” can also be translated, “Be different, as I your God am different.”

St. John, in the second reading today, reminds us that from the very beginning, our baptism makes us different. God so loved us that he has made us “children of God.” John adds that while we are God’s children now, we are destined “to be like God and see God as he is.” Even though we cannot fully comprehend what that means, John encourages us “to live lives that are pure.” Pure lives are lives centered on God, the reign of God and acting as Jesus did. In short, to be pure is to live a life that is not divided.

In his encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, St. Pope John Paul II reminds us that our faith must not be divided. We cannot simply go to church on Sunday, say our prayers, and then go out into the world and act any way our personal whims wish to take us. “Faith has social implications; it is not a private reality.”

An undivided life is one that receives the love of God and gives the love of God to others. We are not Christians just on Sundays; we are Christians 24/7. Our faith shapes our behaviors and decisions, especially how we treat our neighbor, with special emphasis on how we take care of the poor, homeless, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and imprisoned. Remember that Matthew bookends the Beatitudes with the story of the Last Judgment in Chapter 25 of his gospel. The ones who will inherit the kingdom are still the *anawim*, the little ones who remember that Jesus is found in the “least of our brothers and sisters, (*Mt 25: 45*).”

The Church has always struggled how to live this tension of being “in” the world, but not “of” the world. There are two extremes to be avoided. One extreme, occurs when we

sacrifice our Catholic identity and try to be so inclusive that we devolve to the least common denominator and fall into a kind of secular humanism. We are no longer different or counter-cultural when we try to fit in. The other extreme occurs when the Church retreats into itself and sees the world as so evil that we are afraid to engage in any meaningful dialogue around the problems and issues facing the world. This is when the Church can appear to many people, especially the young, to be out of touch with the world and its many pressing issues.

Thankfully, Pope Francis is reminding us that a balanced position means being in dialogue with the world, while at the same time remaining true to the gospel message. Just think how our Holy Father keeps trying to engage the Church and the world in dialogue while keeping this balance on issues like homelessness, poverty, refugees, immigrants, the environment, protection of human life at all stages, the elimination of the death penalty, corporate greed and consumerism. And let's be honest! He is making everyone uncomfortable precisely because he is taking this "other worldly" approach.

This is the path of sainthood. Saints do not have super-human powers. Like us, they lived in a secular world, with competing values; yet they remained different from the world by being like Jesus. Being like Jesus makes us different from the world because God's love is different. Selfless, unconditional, forgiving love is not the world's way of relating, but it is the path of those who are "children of God" longing to see God as God is.

The message of today's scriptures and the celebration of All Saints Day is simple, but not easy. If we want to be saints, we must be willing to be different from the world. To be in the world, but not of the world. To live with one foot on earth and one foot in Heaven. To live "out of this world."