

“The Life of a Saint”

Luke 6:20-31

4 November 2007

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Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Prayer.

It is said that the church is a collection of sinners, not a collection of saints. How true this is. No matter how righteous one may be perceived, every one falls short of the glory of God. We know this to be true by both word and experience. Biblical truth begins with the fallen nature of the human condition, as expressed in the first chapters of Genesis. This is confirmed by experience when one begins to consider the nature and characteristics of our thoughts. So I say, “welcome sinners! Welcome to this humble feast!”

Indeed, when ever we even talk about saints, it makes many of us Protestants nervous. “Isn’t that a Roman Catholic thing?” we naively ask. Well, yes. Yes it is. But we must remember that we share the same history for 1500 years, so talk of saints and sainthood is hour history and tradition, too. When it came to the Reformation, Luther didn’t throw the baby out with the bath water.

Two hundred years later, John Wesley, the Anglican firebrand preacher from Epworth, reframed, and renamed the issue of sainthood. Eighteenth century England longed for spiritual revival, and a new way to think about old truths. So Wesley recognized the characteristics of Christian Perfection.

After one confesses the Lord, Jesus Christ, and is justified, or what we would call “saved” in today’s language, then the new disciple of Christ embarks on a life long journey towards Christian perfection. One doesn’t start perfect. One starts quite imperfect, actually, often times like a bull in a china cabinet.

Wesley would cite Hebrews 6:1 when talking about Christian perfection: “Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ.” It is as if we received the

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fundamentals of being a Christian disciple on the first day of kindergarten, leaving the rest of our education open for improvement. A sad reality is that too many people drop out of school. Too many people never move beyond the first day of kindergarten.

But for the Christian life is about moving on, a pilgrimage, as some would call it, of ever improving refinement, of drawing ever closer to Christian perfection. Bunyan "Pilgrim's Progress," Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," and many other Christian authors have used the journey as a metaphor for Christian perfection.

Wesley would say that "perfection It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, nor to angels, but to God alone. ... It does not make a man infallible: None is infallible, while he remains in the body. ... Is it sinless? It is not worth while to contend for a term. It is 'salvation from sin.' ... It is 'perfect love.' (1 John 4:18.) This is the essence of it; its properties, or inseparable fruits, are, rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, and in everything giving thanks. (1 Thess. 5:16, &c.)¹

It is almost as if the apostle Paul is taking a page from our gospel lesson for this morning, straight from the Beatitudes. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6)

So, it can be said that Saints are those who love. Our journey towards perfection calls us to love both the lovable, and the unlovable, the friend and the enemy. We are called to do good for others, those you like and those you hate. We are to listen to the Savior's command to bless; bless often, bless always, bless those who talk you up and bless those who curse you down. And, as disciples of Jesus, on this journey towards perfection, we are to be a praying people. We pray for those who treat us kindly, and we pray for those who abuse us. Anxiety over content can not, and should not, stop us from praying; rather, this is an invitation to simply open the mind and heart to God, and let him take it from there.

The life of the saint is a life of change, of growth, of improvement. It is never settled or content with what has been, but always looking forward to what can be. This journey mentality can be less than comforting to those of us who find safety in the old and familiar. But we will never experience the exhilaration of the Spirit filling our sails, setting out, seeking new shores, if we never allow our ship to leave the safety of port.

Always loving. Always rejoicing. Always praying. Always blessing. Always giving thanks.

These are the qualities we see in the saints who have deeply influenced our lives. These are the characteristics we are called to practice in our own personal journey of faith; our journey towards perfection.

May it be so. Amen.

1 <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/perfect8.html>