

## Practice What You Preach

**Scripture:**                    **Matthew 23:1-12**

Probably most of us celebrated Halloween this past week by greeting cute little costumed-trick-or-treaters at our doors Tuesday evening. Fewer of us probably took time to celebrate All Saints Day, or “All Hallows Day,” which was observed Wednesday, November 1<sup>st</sup>. Indeed Halloween, with its dark shadowy side, is the pen-ultimate holiday to All Hallows, or All Saints Day. In our American culture, All Hallows has almost been lost in the commercial hype of the Halloween industry.

Yet in predominantly Christian cultures, All Hallows is observed around the world. Set at the season of the year in the Northern Hemisphere that experiences the annual autumnal process of trees and plants shedding their dying leaves in preparation for winter, All Hallows is a festival recognizing the advent of death, just as winter follows autumn. As a way of acknowledging the endings and loss that death brings, in most Christian cultures it’s common practice to remember those family members and loved ones who’ve died and who now rest at peace in the arms of God. This can take the form of reading the names of those who have died in the previous year in church congregations, as well as taking flowers to their gravesides and pausing to remember all they’ve meant and continue to mean to us in our on-going lives.

I remember riding the local train some years ago from downtown Vienna to the Vienna airport, about twelve miles east of the city, when I was preparing to fly home from a visit there. It was Oct. 31<sup>st</sup>, and I noticed an unusual number of older people riding the “*Stadtbahn*,” which made stops at every stop along the way. After 20 minutes or so we reached a long brick wall which seemed to run for miles along the left side of the tracks, and the train made several stops, at each gate in this long expanse of red brick. It marked the perimeter of the “*Zentralfriedhof*,” or Central Cemetery of the city of Vienna, and at each stop, more and more of the little old ladies and men, wearing Austrian-style “*loden*” hats and bundled up against the chill in their overcoats, got off and trudged in their sensible shoes to flower stands positioned near each of the gates to the cemetery. There they bought flowers to decorate the graves of their loved ones, and then marched off in groups through the gates and out of sight as the train headed on again toward the airport. It belatedly struck me that oh yes, this must be in honor of All Saints Day! I’d only been thinking about it being Halloween, which seemed to pass for the most part unobserved there in the heart of Europe. For these older people, who had lived through the many violent and dramatic upheavals of 20<sup>th</sup> Century European history – the end of empire, the rise of Nazism, World War II and the 40 years of Iron Curtain Communism nearby - what was foremost in their minds as winter approached was honoring their dead loved ones, many of whom hadn’t survived these turmoils as they had. It was a tender and sobering moment, full of the melancholy for which Vienna and its culture is renowned.

So what are we Americans to make of All Hallows or All Saints Day? Who are the saints whom we recall? Who are the loved ones who’ve shaped our lives and who

still populate our memories? What would stand for us as a fitting tribute to them and the impact they've had on our lives?

Autumn can be a sad and melancholy time, for sure. With the golden leaves peaking in color in mid-to-late-October and then the winds and rain of November coming, what just a short time ago was a glorious array of nature's beauty suddenly gets blown to smithereens, leaving gray stark branches and cloudy dark skies with the threat of snow to come. Death seems to haunt the landscape of our world, with its cold embrace an unwelcome prospect for the foreseeable future. Oh for the happy days of summer, which now are just memories gone by!

*"To live is to leave, that is all..."* writes Frederick Buechner. *"Life is movement, Heaven knows. We cannot say anything about it that is surer than that. We keep leaving one kind of time for another kind of time, one place for another place, one job, one world, one set of friends, for the next and then on to the next after that, and so on until we finally come to the end of our time and the last of our places. Whether the things that we leave are pleasant or unpleasant, peaceful or unpeaceful, we never stop leaving them for other things. That is what life is."*<sup>1</sup> He recounts a time earlier in his life when a woman who was visiting him and his wife at their hilltop farm in Vermont turned to him after looking at the view out across the rolling hills and asked him *"Why on earth do you ever leave this place?"* He had no answer for her at the time. She'd stumped him. But on further reflection, being a Presbyterian minister, he wrote a sermon entitled *"To Be a Saint,"* in which he gives her and us an answer, of sorts.

*"What is the ultimate motive that underlies the unending movement of our lives? (It) is to become human beings. To become saints...."*<sup>2</sup> He says that the reason he has to leave his hilltop paradise is to become truly human, because life happens in the valleys, in the day-to-day life that plays out in the ordinary, mundane and ugly places of life where one interacts with other human beings in all sorts of circumstances. That's where life is lived and God's love is shared. That's where we become truly human, in Buechner's understanding. And then he has this to say about saints:

*"To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint...but it is more than that. To be a saint is to live not with hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and to weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews. Maybe more than anything else, to be a saint is to know joy. Not happiness that comes and goes with moments that occasion it, but joy that is always there like an underground spring, no matter how dark and terrible the night. To be a saint is to be a little out of one's mind, which is a very good thing to be a little out of from time to time. It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full."*<sup>3</sup>

So as we think of saints at this time of year, who are the people who come to your mind? Ones you've known personally, or whom you may only have read of or seen on TV? Take a few moments to bring them to mind, particularly those whom you personally have had to leave or who've left you through death.

(Pause)

A person whom we call a saint is someone who's practiced what they preached, someone who had a strong consistency between what they professed to believe and how they actually lived out their life. The term *saint* simply means someone who is holy, and holy, in its simplest definition, is someone or something through whom the light of God shines, someone who is infused with God's loving presence.

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus takes on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He seems particularly disturbed by the discrepancy between what they preach and what they practice. To him they're nothing more than puffed-up potentates, who like to be recognized for their public piety, taking for themselves the best seats in the synagogues and coveting the admiration of the crowds. These learned scholars were highly esteemed by the religious folk of Jesus' day, and were referred to with the honored title "*Rabbi*," or *teacher*. Jesus says to the crowd that you should call no one Rabbi but your one teacher, God, and that it's to God that one's allegiance should be given, not to earthly authorities like the Pharisees. "*The greatest among you will be your servant*," he says, "*but all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

The person I brought to mind a couple moments ago was a man in one of my former congregations, named Ray. By the time I became a pastor in his congregation, Ray was in his late seventies, having lived most of his life, not all of which had been easy. Growing up as a kid during the Depression in Sioux City, Iowa, Ray lived down wind of the stock yards there, where he'd found his first job when his parents could no longer earn enough money to provide enough food and clothing for their growing family. Ray had been a high school football player, but his powerful frame was bent and hunched over when I met him all these years later. He had eventually made his way to Chicago in the 1940's, where he'd become a newspaper beat reporter and later an editor. There he'd met and married his first wife, who had later died of cancer when he was in his mid-fifties. Ray then moved to St. Paul to be near his children after her death, and had joined this church and had become an active, involved member of the congregation. He'd served in most every capacity of leadership and responsibility in the congregation, because he wanted to give back to the world the love of God he'd come to know through the ups and downs of his life's journey. For 25 years he took on the roll of being the volunteer coordinator for the "Loaves and Fishes" free meals program which got members of our congregation serving monthly in dishing out dinner to those in need in Frogtown, a low-income neighborhood in St. Paul, not far from our church. Many of the folks who knew him there and from their other interactions with him referred to him as a "Ray of Sunshine," because whoever you were, when you walked through the doors of that church basement for spaghetti dinner on the first Monday night of the month or through the doors of the sanctuary on Sundays, you'd be greeted by Ray's smiling face, kind word and warm handshake. One of the things I noted about him to myself, even in

his last years, when he was wracked by a progressive and terminal form of multiple myeloma, was that he asked you how *you* were doing rather than dwelling on how *he* was doing. He had a twinkle in his eye, and a smile on his face, and he just made you feel good to be around him. Yes, it could indeed be said that he was a “Ray” of God’s sunshine, making those who needed a meal or just to be cheered up feel good about themselves, and better for having encountered him along their way.

There was a high degree of consistency between Ray’s professed belief in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and the life he lived. He practiced what he preached, and it showed. He made people’s lives easier and brighter, by his being a part of their world. They felt valued and affirmed by his caring presence. When I eventually officiated at his funeral service at the church, the place was packed with people of all ages and all walks of life. We all had our stories to tell, of Ray’s ministry to us in so many different contexts. But always the theme was the same: he made us feel good, and he showed us by his actions what it means to live as a Christian in this world.

Two Sundays from now we’ll all have the opportunity to put our money where our mouth is, to make a pledge of financial support to the life of this congregation of Christ’s followers in Sudbury. Money of course is only one way to demonstrate how we practice what we preach. How we spend our money demonstrates where our values and priorities lie. But more than just with our money, we are being called to practice what we preach by Jesus, who demonstrated what it means to live a life of humble service, and by the saints we’ve known personally who’ve also shown us through their actions what that life of discipleship looks like.

So let’s reflect today on the examples of saintly faith and service we’ve been blessed to have known through the personal witness of people whom we’ve loved and of whom we’ve now had to let go. May we be inspired by their example to live and give generously, and to practice what we preach. May we also sense our continued bonds of unity with them which transcend death, as we join together with that great cloud of witnesses, and with all the saints, who gather around this common table to share the heavenly meal to which our Lord invites us.

Yes, thanks be to God! Amen.

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1. Frederick Buechner, “To Be a Saint,” in The Magnificent Defeat, The Seabury Press, Inc., c. 1966, p. 117

2. Ibid, p. 119

3. Ibid., p. 119-120