



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
October 28, 2018 Sermon

For All the Saints: Generation After Generation, the Congregation Proclaims Their Praise

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 12:1-2

Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

Our first Scripture lesson this morning is from the book of Sirach—don't bother looking in your pew Bibles—you won't find it. Sirach is one of the books in the Apocrypha—that middle section of the Bible that comes between the Old and New Testaments—which you can find in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and academic study Bibles, but not in Protestant Bibles; our Protestant forbearers having decided centuries ago to exclude those books.

Now, at this point, you may be wondering why I'm reading from the Apocrypha, and especially on this Sunday of all Sundays, Reformation Sunday—always the last Sunday in October, the Sunday right before All Saints Day, the Sunday right before All Hallows' Day (which is the day right before All Saints' Day which we call Halloween), Reformation Sunday, that one Sunday on the church calendar when we honor the Protestant Reformation, and all our Protestant forbearers, and especially Martin Luther who nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg on All Hallows' Day in 1517 and thus began the Protestant Reformation—you might be asking why I'm reading from the "Catholic" Bible on this Sunday of all Sundays. Good question—hang on to it; I hope the sermon answers it.

Not in our Bible, but not without influence. This passage from Sirach offers a kind of honor roll of the saints, and influenced the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament which offers a similar honor roll in Chapters 11 and 12. For our second Scripture Lesson, I'll read two concluding verses from that honor roll just to keep things kosher—Protestantly speaking, of course.

And the influence goes far beyond that, too. You may recognize the first line of this reading—"Let us now praise famous men"—as the title of a book, a non-fiction piece of photojournalism written by James Agee—chronicling the lives of three tenant farm families during the Great Depression. You might be asking why Agee chose that title given that the people he was writing about were anything but famous. The answer lies in verse 9, where the passage seems to turn:

But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed;

And even more that, the answer lies in the subsequent verses 10-15, which seem to say some paradoxical, if not contradictory, things about such supposedly forgotten people.

So Sirach chapter 44 verses 1-15. Listen now for God's Word:
Let us now praise famous men, our ancestors in their generations.

The Lord apportioned to them great glory:

There were those who ruled kingdoms through valor
those who spoke in prophetic oracles;
those who led the people by their counsels
wise in their words of instruction.

There were those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing.
Endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes,

all these were honored in their generations, and were the glory of their times.
These have left behind a name so that others now declare their praise.

But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed;
they have become as though they had never been born,
they and their children after them.

But these also were godly people
whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten;
their wealth will remain with their descendants,
and their inheritance with their children's children.
Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.
Their offspring will continue forever,
and their glory will never be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace,
but their name lives on generation after generation.

The assembly declares their wisdom,
and the congregation proclaims their praise.

Sermon:

Thursday is All Saints' Day.

"Presbyterians don't have saints"

Of course, in one sense that's true: we don't have an official body of recognized historical figures—Francis of Assisi, Augustine of Hippo, Teresa of Avila, etc.—notable for their miraculous deeds and holy lives who have been declared saints—canonized—by an official church process. Nor do we venerate saints or direct prayers to them.

But all the same, Presbyterians do have saints.

So who is a saint? And what do saints do?

Well, look to your left and to your right. Think of the usher who greeted you this morning. Look up at the choir. Think of our Sunday School teachers and nursery volunteers downstairs. Most especially, think of the person you see everyday in the mirror. The saints are all around us; we are the saints; you are a saint.

Now, before you go getting all modest on me—"Oh, Richard, not me, I'm no saint; other people, yes, but no, not me"—hear me out.

First, it may not be such a compliment, at least not in the usual sense: saints, like prophets, are notoriously quirky, even strange people. As Flannery O'Connor put it: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd."

Second, it's Biblical: in the Bible, the people of God—all the people of God—are called saints. In the New Testament, whenever Paul writes to a church, the church at Philippi, at Rome, even that most difficult church at Corinth, he refers to all its members as "saints."

A saint, in the original meaning, is "a holy person, a holy one of God." When it comes to defining "holiness," the Old Testament scholar James Kugel says this:

What exactly does "holiness" mean? The Bible never defines it. Perhaps the reason is that no definition was necessary. Holy just is; it is an unmistakable state of being. In the Bible, this adjective belongs, first and foremost, to God: God is holy beyond any other trait. The angels who praise God in heaven have, according to Isaiah, only one thing to say: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts." God is, time and again, "Israel's Holy One." Holy is that which most characterizes God.

But not just God. Kugel next adds this important point:

God's holiness rubs off, however, on whatever is close to Him or belongs to Him. . . . God's holiness is not only His salient characteristic, but one that radiates out and sticks in various degrees to everything that is His or is near Him.

God's holiness rubs off on, sticks to, all of God's people, who therefore become the holy ones of God, in other words, the saints. That's all of you—all of us—the saints.

So what do saints do?

"I tell you, whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones—the least of these—none of these will lose their reward."

A cup of cold water. In other words, the smallest things. What the world sees as insignificant and inconsequential: a kind word, a word of encouragement, a prayer, a helping hand, a listening ear, a loving heart, a smile—the smallest things, ordinary, everyday acts of human goodness and human kindness. That is what the saints do.

Over the past few weeks, in thinking about this sermon, I've been asking our members: "Who have been your saints here at Westminster? Who has been your scaffolding; if you will (when God puts a sermon illustration right in front of you, you use it), the people who lifted you up, supported you, kept you up, so that you could live in God's light, and partake of God's holiness?"

I expected names from the past—Bob Stoffer, Dotty Culp, Mason Roberts, and Sarah Bromberger, Hugh Ivan Evans, Bill Schramm, Sandy McConnell, and Tom York; Joe and Betty Albrecht and many others—which I did get.

What I didn't expect was all the names from the present. But by far, the majority of those named were the names of people still very much with us: what I heard time and time again was something like this: my small group, my Presby group, Sue, my church partner, the prayer ministry team, Denise, the people in the nursery, the kitchen crew, Nancy and the people on our mission trip, Jenne, the ID ministry, the woman who came into ID ministry and wanted to see—to pray in—our sanctuary, John, the choir, WPW, the leaders and the kids of MADD Camp. And on it went. All these from the present, still very much with us.

It surprised me. I don't know why it surprised me: it shouldn't have; we are the saints.

Last week, I needed groceries when I got back into town, so I went to Dorothy Lane, and of course ran into half the church there. Standing at the meat counter, I saw and talked to one of our Sunday School teachers: we talked about her class: she told me about a conversation she had begun after class with some members, and that she now was continuing over email. As we went our separate ways, down our separate aisles, the person I was with turned to me and said, "She's a saint."

I don't know why it surprised me: it shouldn't have; we are the saints. And the things the saints do—those seemingly small and inconsequential things—they can have lasting effects, effects beyond all our imagining. "To be faithful in little things," Saint Teresa of Calcutta said, "is a great thing."

Last weekend, I was in Williamsburg Virginia for both a family and college reunion; and as we drove past the right-next-to-campus Catholic Church with the same sign out front that was there some 35+years ago: Catholic Students Association, I remembered something, I remembered something I have never forgotten through all the years since then.

It was my senior year; I was attending a Sunday evening service there. Now I'd like to tell you that I was there because I was the Presbyterian representative on a special campus religious task force to deepen ecumenical relationships. I'd like to tell you that that was the reason I was there, causing all my Protestant forbearers to roll over in their graves. But really, I was there because there was this young woman in my 20th-century Brit. Lit. Seminar, and. . . .and well, it's a good thing that neither God nor God's ushers check our motives when we walk in the church door. . . . I remember it was just this time of year, the Sunday before Halloween and All Saints' Day. I remember this because the young priest gave a sermon about Martin Luther, at least he used Martin Luther as an example, an example of

the power and common bond of our shared baptism in Christ. It went like this: Whenever Luther was brought before a council or tribunal (which was often) in other words, whenever he was on trial for his life for defying the authority of Rome, before he would begin to speak, he would touch his finger to his forehead, and say to himself, under his breath, "I am baptized."

In other words, God has claimed me in the waters of baptism. I belong to God, and God is a mighty fortress: the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.

That was the illustration the young Catholic priest used in a Catholic mass to show the power of our shared baptism in Christ. Whatever my motives for being there that evening, it made an impression.

Like many a young adult, like almost everyone, I had my doubts about religious faith, or at least what passes for religious faith in the world: why does it seem to generate so much hate and suspicion, so much narrow-mindedness and viciousness, so many wars and so much bloodshed, why is it used to cloak so much self-promotion and evil? I can't say that the priest answered all those questions once and for all for me on that day. But I can say this much: in that one magnanimous gesture—"I am baptized"—he showed me—he was living proof—that something far, far greater, something far, far better—something holy—was not only possible but real. I am baptized: we are holy; we belong to God.

I don't know what ever became of that priest; I didn't even know what his name was then, much less remember it now. I can't remember anything else about his sermon or the service. Really, my whole senior year is something of a blur to me now. But this much I know: he was a saint.

Let us now praise famous men. I don't know if you heard the paradox, the apparent contradiction, in those last six verses of the passage from Sirach, but here it is:

In verse 9, the poet turns our attention from famous men to those who are not now, and have never been, famous; those of whom there is no memory, who have perished as though they never existed, who have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them.

But then, paradoxically enough, the poet says that the righteous deeds of these supposedly forgotten people—these unnamed saints—have never been forgotten. More than that, the poet goes on to say that their offspring (instead of being as though they never existed) will continue forever. Even more than that, he next declares that their glory will never be blotted out. And to top it all off, the poet then proclaims that the names of those supposedly forgotten people will live on, generation after generation.

But wait! I thought you said there was no memory of them, that it was as though they had never been born? What gives? The answer lies not in poetic amnesia, but in the last two lines:

The assembly declares their wisdom,
and the congregation proclaims their praise.

It's us. We are their remembrance. We are the ones who continue to keep the covenant, the ones who stand on the scaffolding they have given us, the ones who become that scaffolding for others—we too are the holy ones of God, the saints. It's us. All of us.

So take a moment and think of the saints in your life, those who have gone to glory and now belong to that great cloud of witnesses, and those who are, praise God, still very much with us today—and say a word of thanks. Take a moment.

It's Stewardship season, the season when I talk about why we should all support the church with our pledges, with our money. We do need to restore several more windows, and MADD Camp and all the many, many, other ministries of this church do do wonderful work. They are good reasons, but they are not the reason. The reason we support the church is for all the saints so that generation after generation the congregation proclaims their praise.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.