

“A Blessed Inheritance”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
November 6, 2022
All Saints’ Day
Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Ephesians 1:11-23
Luke 6:20-31

Who are the saints in your life? Whether living or dead, I imagine you could conjure up the image of someone saintly, if asked to do so.

Maybe the person you imagine gave with endless generosity.
Maybe they were patient even under the most frustrating of circumstances.
Perhaps the person you imagine signed up to be on an important church committee that no one else wanted the responsibility to lead.
Did the saint you imagine remember to pray, to tithe? Did their disposition make others think about God or want to become better people?

Last Sunday after a soccer game, we went to dinner with my mother-in-law. Chris and I were talking about church people. She mentioned Judy Nyirongo, and as she was describing Judy to her mom, she said, “Judy is a lovely person. She has one of the warmest, kindest personalities.” Without skipping a beat, Kai asked her, “Does that make you feel bad, Mommy?” (I had permission to tell this story.)

Attainable or not, we all have versions in our head of what sainthood looks like. Many expressions of Christianity rely on the saints for prayer. The Roman Catholic church has a whole process, called canonization, which lifts up those who should be revered as saints. They must be beatified— which means blessed— and part of that process involves determining whether they died for their faith, or whether they performed any miracles while they were living. Among the cast of saints, there is a saint for the mentally ill, a saint for people who lose things, a saint whose care looks upon indigenous people. In many places where Christianity spread, as it layered upon the beliefs and practices of religions that were already in existence, devotion to the many gods and goddesses of converts’ first faith was substituted with worship of the saints.

As we learned from the actors who presented the Reformation drama last week, one of the understandings of being a church in the Reformed tradition is that we don’t have to pray through saints to get to God; we can pray directly to God; we can talk directly to Jesus, and be heard. The Reformation also teaches us to not just look to the exemplary characters in our faith tradition to be saints; as part of the Priesthood of All Believers, we are— each and every one of us— called to sainthood, too.

But *how* do we live into the sainthood to which Christ calls us? I ask, because I’m pretty sure that I am not there yet. In his beatitudes, Jesus gives a roadmap for sainthood, or blessedness.

Our inheritance is a call to continue this work. Even if we don't complete it, we work toward it with the faith that someone, some people, with God's help, *will*. Sainthood doesn't demand our perfection, because we are made perfect in a body of people and in a story much bigger than we are.

Let me tell you about a saint I always think about this time of year. Her name was Larisa, and she was in my church youth group in Chicago. My first year at that church, she was in 8th grade and took part in the Confirmation class. She wore a bright red dress on the day she was confirmed, and was also baptized— I remember, because it was such a stark contrast to her normal wardrobe, which was mostly harkened back to a 1990's grunge look, loose fit, dark colors. Larisa wrote poetry and sometimes reflected on her early childhood, when she lived in Ukraine, where she alone took care of her 2 younger siblings, before they were all three adopted by a family from my church. By the time she was in 9th grade, she was involved in drugs; by 10th grade, she had a boyfriend who was a gang leader; by 11th grade, she was pregnant with his child. She had every resource invested in her well being, from her family, her church, her school, her counselors and rehab programs, and yet none of it would be enough— she was drawn to danger like a moth to a flame. She chose to keep the pregnancy, even though we urged her to prayerfully consider termination as a good and moral option. She went into labor when she was on the streets, coming down from a high. I met her at the hospital. Her pimp was lying in the hospital bed with her. I worked with her family and social worker to determine a safe place for her baby to stay— but before Larisa had to relinquish her beautiful daughter to the system, we gathered in a lactation room with her family, Larisa still in her hospital gown, and I baptized her baby as she had asked me to do. Shortly after Larisa was released from the hospital, my next time visiting her was in the Cook County Jail. She always wanted to get better, so that she could visit with her daughter and maybe even one day could live with her, *mother* her. My visits with Larisa continued after jail as she tried to pull her life together. But she never did. Her hunger was for things that could never feed her. She died of an overdose, my first year at this church.

Blessed are you who hunger, for you shall be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. According to this definition of beatification— or blessedness, Larisa is a saint. Jesus made these promises, and there is no logical pathway from one to the other: from being poor, to possessing the kingdom of God; from being hungry, to being filled; from being hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, to rejoicing, leaping for joy, rewarded. And yet, these are the promises Jesus makes.

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount (or, according to Luke, the Sermon on the Plain), he was speaking to people from all walks; in addition to the disciples, he spoke to a crowd that included people from Jerusalem, Tyre and Sidon. Most likely they were people who had it all together in their lives, and people whose lives were falling apart. People who were among those who followed Jesus hoping to be cured of illness or injury. People who were near their death, and people who would outlive Jesus by generations. People who were models of faith, and people who were models of what *not* to do.

According to Jesus' sermon, there is something embedded in blessing that involves recognizing what it is to be without. It's as if Jesus has a special relationship with them, and wants to see them through to their arrival at blessedness. If you already have it all: wealth, popularity, power, fullness, but do not know what it means to go without, you still have some spiritual or material work to do if you are going to inherit the kingdom of God. You can start by offering your coat to someone who doesn't have one, or practice loving your enemies, if you want to discover what blessing means.

Another church plus two generations of confirmation youth later, I'm helping equip *this* year's PCL Confirmation class with learning materials as their mentors teach them. Today, they talked about how we understand scripture. Hopefully they learned that in some parts of the bible, the same story gets told by different people, and the story changes just a bit based on the writer's perspective. For that reason, in Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in *spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke says "Blessed are the *poor*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." One writer was in tune to what Jesus was teaching about the body; the other, in teaching about the soul. I suspect Jesus longed to satisfy each of those needs. But I am convinced that Jesus had a special kind of love for those who were on the underside of life: the poor, the hungry, the hated, and still does.

As heirs to the sainthood brought to us, may each of us be blessed to seek out that pathway, so that we not only find our way from hunger to fullness, but that we can make that possible for others as well. After church today, we will have a lunch with a role-playing game. Each participant will be given \$150 of Monopoly money. Then they will be asked to spend it, according to what they prioritize most in the life of our church. One thing that I have heard, and I firmly believe, is that the National Budget is a moral document: it illuminates the things our country values most. I will be thinking about that carefully as I head to the polls on Tuesday, and I hope those of you who are able will vote thoughtfully, too, to help ease that path, *while we are still on earth*, from hunger and poverty to fullness and well-being for each of God's children. If we act according to the sainthood to which God calls us, it can be done. It is the response one gives to the love that has been shown by God and through Jesus Christ.

As far as the goals that aren't accomplished, the goodness not attained, the suffering not relieved in this lifetime, there *is* good news. *God isn't done with us yet*. God's love and God's care, it continues beyond this lifetime, and God will see us through to that place of peace, that beloved community where justice and righteousness kiss, that place where suffering ends, that realm where we unlock the mysteries of our sacred inheritance. Let us be thankful, blessed ones. Let us rejoice, saints of God.