

All Saints Sunday (November 6, 2022)

Text: Ephesians 1:11-23

### ***“What Does It Mean to Be ‘Holy’?”***

The word “saint” comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, and is usually translated as “holy.” *Sanctus* was the word used by St. Jerome in the Latin Vulgate to translate the Greek word ἅγιος (agios), itself a translation in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word קָדוֹשׁ (kadosh) — both are usually translated into English as “holy.”

That word — “holy” — has many meanings in English. We tend to use it as a synonym for “pure” that is, untouched by sin, or immorality; in that sense, “virtuous.” Holy often means “spiritual” (whatever that now means). People appropriate to themselves what quality of spirituality they deem appropriate. “Spiritual” today means anything from wicca to the martial arts.

*“In recent years, spirituality in religion often carries connotations of a believer having a faith more personal, less dogmatic, more open to new ideas and myriad influences, and more pluralistic than the doctrinal/dogmatic faiths of mature religions.”* says the article on “Spiritual” in Wikkipedia. *“It also can connote the nature of believers’ personal relationship or ‘connection’ with their god(s) or belief-system(s), as opposed to the general relationship with a Deity as shared by all members of a given faith. Those who speak of spirituality as opposed to religion generally meta-religiously believe in the existence of many ‘spiritual paths’ and deny any objective truth about the best path to follow. Rather, adherents of this definition of the term emphasize the importance of finding one’s own path to whatever-god-there-is, rather than following what others say works. In summary: the path which makes the most coherent sense becomes the correct one (for oneself).”*

That path need not be “godly” (another word we use for “holy”) in the current jargon. But it is good to be “pious” — except we dislike persons who are “holier than thou,” who display their piety, their piousness, at the expense of others.

“Perfect,” is another way we use “holy.” ***“You must be perfect,”*** Jesus said, ***“as your Father in heaven is perfect.”*** (Matthew 5:48)

A big synonym for “holy” is “righteous.” The Greek word is δικαίος (dikaios) — it has another translation which I rather like: “just” defined as. “declared right” “made just.”

Here is where we get into what it means to be “holy” — ἅγιος, and ὁ ἅγιος both mean “set apart.” All righteousness, Luther argued, is *extra nos* — it is *outside us*. We do not set ourselves apart, we are set apart, made distinct, separated out . . . Because we are *declared* righteous (*extra nos*), in Jesus Christ we have hope, in Him we have power, in Him we have victory, and in Him we have fullness (Paul argues in Ephesians 1, let me walk us through it):

In Christ we have hope: [vv.17-18] St Paul prays: ***“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints . . .”***

In order to have any sense of spiritual growth in our lives, we need a knowledge of Christ that comes to us in a personal way. This is not the factual knowledge that we can obtain by taking a course on the life of Christ, but the knowledge that comes to us through the work of God’s Spirit in, and on, our lives. This is the difference between “knowing about” and “knowing” by experience; between something being true and it being real.

I knew about being a father long before I ever had children. In a sense, I had some knowledge of parenting. It was not until my own children were born that I knew parenting in a personal way. Indeed, when our daughter, Gretchen, was born (of course she came on a Sunday morning, so I was driving Kristine to the hospital and not leading worship that morning). The following Sunday I announced, ***“Any statements I have***

*made on the subject of parenting are now 'inoperative.'*” I knew about parenting; I did not know what parenting was like.

This is a really important issue when it comes to our desire to see people we love come to the experience of faith in God for themselves. Giving facts about God, or saying what we think Christ would want someone else to do, never really gets the task done. We learn from the apostle Paul here that the way to start is to pray for people before we ever consider talking to people about the life of faith.

The question I would put before you is — *“How many people do you have on your personal prayer list that you pray regularly would come to know Christ and the life of faith?”*

In Christ We Have Power [19-20]. Paul prays: *“ . . .his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms . . .”*

It is difficult to overstate the phrase, *“His incomparably great power...”* We might try, “super mega power,” but even that does not quite get it. This is the power, Paul says, that God used in raising Christ from the dead and brought about the reality pointed to in the creed when it is affirmed that Christ is, *“seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”*

One of the great issues in our world today is the sense in which people feel powerless. We have not really begun to understand what is the real intent of faith for our lives and for our church — it is about how we come together as a church in God’s power to carry out our mission in the world around us. We are called to be salt and light, to give witness to God’s mighty power to bring about justice, hope, and love.

Yet it is more than clear that none of this can take place within our own strength. It is when we are in touch with, and energized by, the power of God, which is intended to work within us, that we begin to sense the possibility of changing the world around us. Paul points to the fact that

this power of God that can work within us is not something ordinary. He prays for the church continually that they will have the spiritual knowledge it takes to be the powerful church God desires us to be.

In Christ We Have Victory [21-22] Paul continues to pray: “***[Christ is seated] far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church . . .***”

This takes us back to one of the central themes in all of scripture, namely: God’s people live under the power of a divine promise that, no matter how long the road may seem or how dark the night may appear to be, God’s victory over all unrighteousness is certain. We live under the promise of the resurrection, the power of God within the community of faith and the affirmation that “all things” have been put under the feet of Christ who is, “***head over everything for the church.***”

Do you catch the promise there? Christ is head *for you!* For the work He gives you to do. It is the certainty of God’s victory in the long term that powers our life of faith in the short term.

In Christ We Have Fullness. Paul concludes his prayer: “. . .***[for the church], which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.***”

We need to untangle this a bit, but the heart of this short verse of scripture is that Jesus Christ brings fullness; that is, completeness and full maturity to our lives as God intended them to be. BUT pay attention! This is spoken to the church, the family of faith, the people of God. This is not a “Jesus and me” kind of individualistic fulfillment that would imply God’s greatest concern is that I live a happy and comfortable life.

The New Testament vision of the church is that it is healthy and whole, a church where people may discover the fullness of Christ; a church that is self-consciously bound together as the Body of Christ. This is a church where Christ is the head — not in name only — but is the *evident* head

of the church. This is not something that comes about because we hang a mission statement in the halls of the church building or open with prayer at a church board meeting. This is Christ as head of the church which is evidenced by our openness to God, to each other, and to the cries of a broken world. It is something people know by experiencing our life together and not something they read in our newsletter.

One of the reasons we don't experience the fullness of Christ in the church too often is that we have too low a view of the church. It is seen as just another social grouping by too many. We will gain the power God has for us when we regain a very high sense of the Church as the Body of Christ and ourselves as intimately woven together in a fabric of faithful community. Perhaps it would help to re-center ourselves on Paul's words in Eph. 5:25, "***Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...***"

To be "holy" then takes on a depth of meaning way beyond dabbling in matters spiritual, or doing some things that might make you regarded as more pure, or godly, or pious. You have been set apart by God to receive from Him hope, power, victory, and fullness. You did not choose to be holy; God has made you, and is making you, holy — ὅσιος — ἅγιος — sanctus — saints!

Amen.