

The Saints Keep Marching
Hebrews 12:1-2; Matthew 7:21-28
Sermon, 11/4/18

Allow me to share two stories of saints I have been blessed to know. Some of you may recognize them from other sermons. They, along with so many others, have left an indelible impression on me, and in many ways have shaped my attempt at living faithfully.

Sally was a bar tender and member of one of my earliest pastorates. She was a thorough and tumble, no nonsense sort of person. She spoke her mind freely. Some people had trouble with her honesty, finding her too direct. Some even wondered if she really fit in their church. They would say something like, "what kind of woman tends bar frequented by rowdy men?" Sally, because she worked late hours, frequently did not attend church. When she could, she did. Unknown to some of the church members, she helped many needy people. She shared advice, lent an ear to lonely people, cared for a neighbor who was frail and unable to shop for herself, and so much more. When her church was being remodeled, an appeal went out for specific items. One request was for money to buy a new Communion Table. The money was quickly received, along with money for a new set of altar cloths. No one knew its source except for the pastor. Her instructions and explanation to him was clear. "I know how some people feel about me and how I make my living. I do not want their feelings about me to taint Holy Communion. It should never be about me. It should always be about God's love for us."

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father.

Of all the people that have blessed my life, Al continues to stand out. Al was almost fifty years older than I. We first met in 1966 when I arrived in Middletown, New York. I came there as the full time assistant pastor for the St. Paul's UMC. I was 24, Al was 74; I was not sure how prepared I was for the challenge, Al was sure of himself, his gifts and talents. He encouraged me to unabashedly offer my own? He was a retired United Methodist pastor and worshipped regularly at St. Paul's. The membership was over 1000, and drew a fairly large congregation on Sunday mornings. The youth group drew upwards of fifty kids each week. The congregation's Shut-in list was about the same number. My prescribed task was mostly pastoring these two age groups. Having spent the previous three years in seminary during the week and weekends as a Youth Pastor at a large church in Flushing, Queens, the youth part of the assignment seemed less daunting. But that

many ÷old peopleø gave me pause. How did I begin? Where did I start? So when Al came to visit me for the first time, I sought his advice. His exact words have been forgotten. But his message has not! He said ÷go see them, be sure they know you love them. The rest will be easy.ø ÷I can do thatø was my thought, and I did. Al may not have been aware of the impact that advice has had on my life. If he was not, he should have been. I told him almost weekly how helpful his words were. I have remembered his words, and still do, in every new ministry of my life. ***Be sure they know you love them. The rest will be easy.*** His words came from the heart and led us to a friendship that lasted until he died in his late eighties. Even when I left Watertown for a church in Brooklyn, Al visited me every Tuesday. He lived his advice. He always made sure I knew he loved me.

Sally and Al witnessed to their faith, not so much with words, but with actions. To use the words of the writer of Hebrews, they were part of such a ***great a cloud of witnesses***, who have tutored me and encouraged me ***to run with perseverance the race that is set before (me) us.***

By any definition they were, and remain, Saints in my heart, if by Saint, one means someone committed to living in a way that gives substance to the claim that God is Love, and that Jesus is the Prince of Love. Which, by the way, so much of our Scriptures declares to be the mark of sainthood. It is not religious piety, strict adherence to a specific religion, or attendance at regularly scheduled times, (although all of those practices are good pathways) are not what determines sainthood or goodness. Jesus surely has much to say about what saintliness, holiness, goodness, and such looks like. Two of my favorite, yet most challenging teachings attributed to Jesus, speak to these things. One is found in the reading from Matthew this morning.

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of God. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not cast out demons in your name, and do so many deeds in your name? Then I will say to them, ‘I never knew you....

Harsh words, which beg for definition and interpretation in 2018, but words which even so point a finger away from religious behavior and toward behavior that actively seeks to advance the will of the God of love. As if to underscore this teaching, we also find Jesus admonishing those who would follow him to be radically hospitable to all. Not to do so would risk missing the gift of eternal life (life that is at peace with oneself, peace with the world, and with God). Likely we all remember the teaching, couched in images of Jesusø time. Matthew pictures Jesus (the Son of Man) passing judgment on nations and individuals. In it, Jesus

separates them into the categories of sheep and goats. Sheep go to his right side, which is to say the preferred spot. Goats go to his left side, not the preferred spot.

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will ask 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry... or thirsty...or a stranger...or naked...or sick...or in prison..?'

When? When did these things happen?

When? And Jesus answers: *í . Just as you did for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you have done it to me.* Of such is sainthood, holiness, goodness made and found.

Sally and Al are still very much alive and among us. They may have different names now. Yet we know them. We know them by the depth of care for others that they exhibit. We know them by their undying conviction that Love is the greatest of all the gifts we have been given and the greatest we can give back to the world. We know them by their hearts, not their religious or other affiliations. They are not difficult to spot despite any circumstance. They are the one who are ever hope filled, who see what is, but work for what may yet be.

Despite what the current events and environment might suggest, they are still around. These Saints Keep Marching. We are surrounded by them. They live in our midst and in our memories. In our bleakest moments, in times when we wonder if there is any reason to hope for a better time, we do well to remember the Saints that have marched before us, the Saints that march with us, and the Saints that are still to come. They are a reminder for us to keep the faith, to live lives of radical hospitality, lives that reflect the Love that is always ultimately triumphant.

On this day on which we celebrate all the Saints, may we move with the sheep, rather than the goats. May we be among those who ***Keep Marching***. And may that bring us a ***Peace that passes all human understanding***.