



Sermon for All Saints' Sunday
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
November 3, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man really hated his wife's cat. One day he took the cat two blocks down the street in his neighborhood and gave it to a neighbor. When he got home he saw that the cat had beat him home. Undeterred, he put the cat in the car and took it a few miles across the city and gave it to a golfing buddy of his. Upon returning home, he was astonished to see that the cat had beat him home again.

Determined at this point, the man took the cat and drove him across the city, over the river, through the woods, and clear across three counties and left him at the first animal shelter he came to. Several hours later the man's wife was at home when the phone rang. She picked up and it was her husband. "Is the cat there?" He asked. "Yes..." she replied. "Well put him on the phone, I'm lost"

Today is All Saints Sunday, so you may be wondering two things. What is All Saints Sunday and what does a cat joke have to do with it? All Saints Sunday is the Sunday immediately following the Feast of All Saints – which was on Friday, Nov. 1. The Feast of All Saints occurs on Nov. 1 every year and is the day set aside to commemorate all the Saints in Christian history, and especially those for whom we don't have room in the calendar to assign a specific day. I think it's helpful to remember that there is a difference between All Saints Day and All Souls Day, because All Souls Day is on Nov. 2 – that was yesterday – and All Souls Day commemorates all the faithful departed, that is, all Christians who have died and gone to be with the Lord as they await the day of resurrection.

Halloween fits into all this as well because it's the evening before All Saints Day. In medieval English one of the synonyms for "Saint" was the word "Hallow" which meant "holy." So the Saints were the "Holy Ones" or the "Hallowed Ones." In that nomenclature All Saints Day was All Hallows Day – the Day of All the Hallowed Ones. The evening before All Hallows Day, October 31, was therefore All Hallows' Eve, which was eventually shortened to Halloween.

Just this week, thanks to an article that Dawn forwarded me, I learned that these three days – Halloween, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day – are sometimes called All Hallows Eve. So, today, All Saints Sunday marks the end of All Hallows Eve and gives us a chance to hear and reflect on the scripture readings assigned to the principal feast of this season: All Saints Day.

I am especially struck this morning by the All Hallows gospel text this year, from Luke 6. It is, I believe, one of the most remarkable passages in all of Jesus' teaching because in these few short verses Jesus seems to reverse and flip on its head everything we think we know about right and wrong and how to treat our fellow human beings. On average, I would say that most of us believe in treating others the way they treat us: if they're mean to us, we're mean back. If they hurt us, we hurt them back. Many of us, in fact, believe in striking back twice as hard as others hit us – just to teach others a lesson.

Into this basic understanding of right and wrong, of fair and unfair, Jesus wades with words that unsettle and challenge us. "Love your enemies," he says. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." This is radically different than anything we would have ever imagined – it harkens back to other passages we've read from Luke in the last couple of months, such as the parables of the unjust Father and the unjust Steward. Again we are reminded that God's primary goal is not revenge, or punishment, or even justice. God's primary goal is reconciliation and restored relationship. God is all about breaking cycles of violence and revenge in order to create real and lasting relationship based on forgiveness.

And that's where the cat joke comes in. The man hated the cat – the way the world sometimes hates Christians. The man tried to get rid of the cat – the way the world sometimes tries to get rid of Christians. But the cat wasn't deterred, he kept coming back, and at the end of the day the man needed the cat – the way the world sometimes wakes up to discover that it needs, or at least comes to appreciate the value of, Christians.

Many of the stories of the Saints are like that. I am mindful here of some of the slightly more obscure Saints – not necessarily St. Valentine or St. Peter – but the ones whose stories we have to look up to remember, such as St. Alban or St. Anthimus of Nicomedia. In their stories there is often an amazing twist of events that goes something like this: the persecutors come to kill them but they don't fight back. Like Jesus their Lord they are prepared to die in order to break the cycle of violence. And when their persecutors see the Saint's faith and courage, when they see that they will not respond to violence with violence, the persecutors themselves repent and are converted to faith in Christ. In some of the stories the authorities have to work their way

through two or three different executioners before they find someone who will carry out the violence instead of being converted by the faith they are witnessing.

When I read the teachings of Jesus, and hear the stories of All the Saints who confessed Christ before the world and died rather than respond with violence to violence, I sometimes wonder what's become of Christianity here in 21st century America. All too often it seems that I hear Christians talking about defending themselves, hurting other who would hurt them, and flat out hating their enemies, rather than loving their enemies, doing good to those who hate them, blessing those who curse them, and praying for those who abuse them. And we live in a nation that is predominantly Christian and where we are free to practice our religion. What would become of us if we ever faced actual, real persecution? Would we even have the faith to follow in the footsteps of the Saints who've gone before us or would our thin skins and weak constitutions crumble in the face of actual enemies instead of imagined ones?

I'll finish with a rather trivial example of what I'm talking about. Last year I was talking with a Christian woman here in town, not a member of our Parish, and she mentioned in passing that a store clerk had recently wished her a "happy holidays" instead of a "merry Christmas." This Christian woman said that it made her sick to her stomach. Let's set aside for a moment what I would call basic good manners. I mean, when I was growing up I was taught that when someone said something nice to me – like "happy holidays" – that I should politely say "thank you" and go on with my day content that a fellow human being said something nice. Apparently this woman was not taught that.

But, as I said, let's set aside good manners, and just ask ourselves what the great Saints of ancient times, who were beaten, flogged, and beheaded, say about her reaction? What would our Lord, who said "love your enemies" have to say about her reaction? If I may be so bold as to put words in their mouths, I suspect they might say "suck it up buttercup, in the grand scheme of things that doesn't even count as someone being unkind to you because of your faith."

My point is this: following Jesus is not always easy, sometimes people will disagree with us, sometimes people won't believe what we believe, and sometimes in some places in some times of history they will even try to hurt us. But we are surrounded by the souls of the faithful departed who lived their lives in faithful commitment to Christ and set for us the example of faithfully loving God and loving those who disagree with us.

We can do this too. By the grace of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives we too can be Saints; we can too can be faithful day in and day out, year after year, until we are called home.

We truly can love our enemies, as Christ does, if we will put our faith in him and follow in the footsteps of All the Saints who went before us.

Amen.