



Texts in Context

For All What Saints? Preaching All Saints Day

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Several years ago I heard about a young woman from Southeast Asia who was greatly disturbed by the American celebration of Halloween. Raised in a country with deep animist roots and a healthy (if not fearful) respect for the realm of dead spirits existing in the midst of the living, she was appalled by the cavalier way in which we Americans mocked the spirit-world. She was genuinely afraid that the spirits of our departed ancestors would be so offended by our antics on the eve of All Saints Day, that they would cause us a great deal of malicious harm in the year to come. I am not so worried about that, but I am saddened that our observance of All Saints Day has turned into an occasion to make money for the candy companies. As Americans, we really have no idea of the proper way to remember all those Christian saints (canonized or otherwise) who have preceded us and who have shaped our own Christian vocations.

THE TEXTS

For All Saints Sunday this fall (2008 – Series A) we have three texts from which it is rather difficult to preach. The first reading is Rev 7:9–17, the apocalyptic vision of the great multitude of the redeemed in heaven, surrounding the throne of God. The second reading is 1 John 3:1–3, with its description of the children of God, alienated from the world and being pure just as God is pure. The Gospel is Matt 5:1–12, the Beatitudes. All three are notoriously difficult texts for the

American culture has either trivialized All Saints Eve into a time of free candy or idealized All Saints Day as a festival of the unachievable. The texts are more real than that—and so is sainthood.

preacher, and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that our culture simply has no idea what to do with many of the themes and ideas that these passages raise. Oftentimes, we are reduced to mawkish sentimentality (“Remember your dear departed!”), apocalyptic thundering (“Better get saved!”), or platitudinous morality (“You’d better get yourselves pure”), without really touching the central wonder of these texts, and of All Saints Day.

THE CONTEXT

Before looking at the texts themselves, it's important to understand the modern American cultural context of All Saints Day, so as to get an idea of how our assembled congregations might receive the words we speak. When we intone the biblical cadences about the blessed ones in the Beatitudes, the heavenly redeemed saints in Revelation, and the purified children of God in 1 John, these words fall strange upon American ears. The references seem so old-fashioned, so otherworldly, so, well, not us—as though referring to some unnaturally religious beings of a status that we could never hope to achieve, nor (secretly) that we even want to achieve. Maybe we think of some old pious grandmother from our youth—admirable, but not something to which we personally aspire. These three passages seem to us so ethereal, so otherworldly, that they appear to have little or no application to our lives here and now.

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First, we really have trouble with the whole concept of sainthood itself. When the average American thinks of a saint, or someone who is holy, it is generally in moralistic terms. A saint, a holy person, is a morally perfect individual, someone who has so transcended the normal temptations of the human condition as to exist on a different moral plane. Ask for an example of a saint, and you'll probably get the names of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Pope John Paul II, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, or another such moral superstar who has achieved cosmic fame by renouncing all normal human pleasures and desires. These are people of whom we are in awe, whose holiness transcends the bounds of our imagination; we admire them, but despair of ever achieving their level of sanctity. We conceive of holiness as a spiritual form of dieting, something we know that we should do, but cannot really sustain for more than a short period of time. We suspect that, in the end, sanctity or holiness is really not much fun for all the work involved, that it will not really pay off.

Besides this, we secretly suspect that holy people, saints, are hypocrites underneath it all. Our cynicism and experience tell us that those who seem to be this holy are really just faking it; that our moral heroes really do have feet of clay. We

are just waiting for the other moral shoe to drop (so to speak), and we will find out all the real dirt on those who seem so saintly. Anytime one of our American televangelists has a professional or moral collapse, which they do with spectacular regularity, we sit up on our moral high horses and say, "I told you so!" Witness the reaction, a few years ago, when the letters of Mother Teresa were published, candidly showing us her inner struggles and periods of despair; many Americans were shocked and disillusioned that such thoughts could even cross the mind of such a saintly person. At best we might think of a saint, a holy person, as a mild religious neurotic, obsessed with God and religious purity; someone to be tolerated rather than emulated.

Much of this attitude toward sanctity and holiness can be traced back to the beginnings of our national religious culture. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, so important for American culture, dispensed with the supernatural as being, well, un-natural. The Enlightenment thinkers still saw some use for religion (sheared of any supernatural elements) in order to inculcate morality; they graciously allowed for some vague supernatural elements in organized religion as a "crutch for the weak-minded," but not for themselves. Organized religion was, above all, useful for the fact that it made people moral, and this was the only reason to continue to practice it. Those who controlled organized American religion did not necessarily agree with this, but found they could come to terms with it. The Enlightenment gave them a deal: a social compact that allowed organized religion to become the social conscience of the nation and determine its morality.

Equally important were the ideas of sanctification and moral perfectionism brought into American religious culture by the Methodists, those religious upstarts who achieved a dramatic corner on American religion; by 1850 they numbered thirty-five percent of all religious Americans. Wesley proclaimed the doctrine of perfectionism: "the Christian teaching that complete holiness is obtainable by divine grace to every believer."¹ That teaching soon spread from the Methodists; it was a doctrinal cornerstone of the revivalist form of Protestantism that became the religious consensus in early nineteenth-century America. The instant conversion of the individual released a huge amount of spiritual energy that was channeled in two directions, individual and corporate. Individually, the converted believer sought an intense personal holiness in a strict code of morality: no drinking, swearing, gambling, use of tobacco, or sexual and personal indiscretions, and strict observance of the Sabbath and the Ten Commandments. Corporately, evangelical Protestantism launched a massive series of moral and evangelical crusades to transform society along Christian lines and to see that the word of God was spread to all corners of the world. When this movement divided along liberal and conservative lines after the Civil War, each group took one of the elements of Christian perfectionism as its own and dropped the other. The evangelical conservatives generally

¹Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., "Perfectionism," in *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1996) 2:505.

held fast to the perfectionist element of a strict personal morality, while pulling back from the idea of creating heaven on earth (hence their apocalyptic premillennialism). The evangelical liberals, on the other hand, held to the moral crusade to create the kingdom of God on earth, while loosening the strict moral code of the revivalists. Both groups, the core of American Protestantism, held to the perfectionist vision of American society, but they conceived of it in very different applications.

Thus when most religious Americans hear the call of heaven in Revelation, the language of purity in 1 John, or the vision of beatific holiness in the Beatitudes, they hear it in at least one of two modes—either the strict personal morality of the evangelical conservatives or the social transformation of the evangelical liberals—or sometimes as a mix of the two. But what is important is that they hear the proclamation of the gospel in these three passages as essentially perfectionistic moralism. These three visions of the kingdom of God are what we must do, morally, to build it within our lives or within our society. And American Christians have unleashed a massive amount of energy to accomplish these goals, and they have done a tremendous amount of good in the world along the way.

And yet, despite all the efforts, we have neither perfected ourselves nor the world in which we live, and we constantly find our energy flagging in pursuit of these goals. The pursuit of moral perfectionism is not sustainable over time, and when our energy for this drops or we fail, it is not unreasonable for us to question the goals or to begrudge those who seem to be succeeding where we have failed (hence the roots of our suspicion and resentment). As modern Americans, we live either in this religious vision of perfectionism or in its secular counterpart, and it forms much of the world in which we live, accounting for our varied reactions to the language of holiness, sanctity, and purity that we see in these three biblical passages.

THE TEXTS IN CONTEXT

So the question remains, how do we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in the midst of our American culture? How do we speak of saints and holiness, purity and morality, in a situation where this (distorted) picture of perfectionism reigns, either in its religious or secular forms? What can heaven mean in a world that neither understands the supernatural element of belief nor really trusts it very much? How do we preach in a world that turns All Saints into Halloween, the heavenly redeemed into free candy? There are elements in these three All Saints texts that show us the way.

First, a healthy dose of Lutheran theological anthropology is in order here, to counteract the idea that individualistic holiness is even possible. Since the Enlightenment, Christians have had the tendency to forget that human beings are neither totally good nor totally bad, but a complex mixture of saints and sinners, all at the same time. Luther reminds us that we can combine selfish and selfless motivations,

even in the same action, and that we are not as morally good as we hope nor as morally bad as we fear. In this life we will never escape the gravitational pull of our own sin, much as we yearn to break free from its orbit. Just as we are freed from sin through the power of God's grace, we still need to fight against the "old Adam" within us, not to achieve perfection, but to turn our wills toward the will of God. 1 John 3 shows this tension between the "already" and the "not yet" quality of our Christian lives; verse 2 speaks of our being God's children now, but of our not knowing what we will become. John assures us that we will be like God, even though he admits that we do not now know what this will be like.

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Second, it might help to go back and brush up on our Wesleyan theology, to absolve John Wesley for the misuse of Christian sanctification and perfectionism that has become commonplace in modern American society. When Wesley spoke of moral perfection, he said that this could be possible for individual humans only through the grace of God and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. The great moral crusades of our individual and corporate lives fade, as we have seen, when they are cut off from the supernatural power of God the Holy Spirit; then the noble quest for achieving purity in the world is reduced to a series of personal moral choices. These choices cannot be sustained, and our failure leaves us angry, jealous, or resigned. The saints are those who are sustained in good times and bad times by the power of God and the hope (not optimism!) of the coming kingdom of God. The text from Revelation shows this, in that the saints in heaven have been made clean through the blood of Christ, the Lamb; it is only in their union with Christ that they have any share of the heavenly kingdom.

Third, we must reexamine and redefine what purity means in the current American context. Here again we fight against the Enlightenment's idea that the human person is a *tabula rasa* (a blank slate) upon which moral deeds or moral misdeeds are recorded. This idea of a moral blank slate confuses us into thinking that if we just order our lives in the correct fashion, we can be without sin—we can be pure. This is the origin of the modern sentimental idea of the purity of infants—since they have no power to freely choose good or evil, they are thus morally pure and sinless.² We think that purity is only the realm of little children who have not matured into the power of sinning, and we despair of the fact that we will achieve the sinless purity of a little child. This can be easily refuted, however; anyone who has spent a sleepless night with a screaming infant can readily attest to the reality of original sin and human depravity in anyone, even in an infant! This is not

²This is also the root of much of our Christmas piety around the "sweet little Christ child." We much prefer this vision of Christ to the bloody Christ of Good Friday and the punctured Christ of Easter.

sin as moral choice, of course, but as the focus on self that brings out the external or internal tantrums in all of us.

Purity, then, is not sinlessness. Purity is the quality of vision and commitment to the will of God; it is being driven by a desire to achieve this in ourselves and in the world. As Søren Kierkegaard observed in the title of one of his famous devotional works, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” This is the meaning of the beatitude in Matt 5:8; purity is the sincere longing for the kingdom of God, the sense that ultimately this kingdom is our only goal in life. The things of this world can and do give us tremendous pleasure, as they ought, but they are transient pleasures, nonetheless. The language of purity in 1 John is parallel to this, as we have the hope of purity in our transformation in God; we seek purity to come into line with that purity which God already is. Our moral actions, then, may be a part of what we mean by purity, but they are not what defines purity in the end.

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What, then, do we make of saints? How can we depict them in a way that makes sense to a culture that really does not understand the whole idea of sanctity or holiness, or, if it does, understands these terms in such a rarified manner that this status is achieved by only a select few spiritual superstars. The holiness of saints is what Luther might call an “alien righteousness,” something that is granted to them, and to which they, in turn, conform their lives. Sanctity is less about the evil we resist than the good that we embrace. Those heavenly multitudes singing praises to God around the heavenly throne are those who remained true and faithful to the one who redeemed them and set them free from the power of sin. This did not happen without blood—the blood of Christ their shepherd, and their own blood, given in faithfulness to his cause. The saints are those mentioned in the Beatitudes as seeking to live under the rule of God on this earth. They refuse the selfishness of personal interest in order to be faithful to their God and to the children of God around them. They are “poor in spirit”; they know their own lack of purity, and they seek that which comes from God. They mourn, they are meek, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, they are merciful and are peacemakers. They are persecuted and remain faithful; they single-mindedly seek God. All these things have a secondary element of will to them; having conformed our minds to the will of God, we naturally seek to conform our lives, as well. Given the weakness of the clay that is ourselves, however, we can never envision our sainthood in simply moralistic terms; we cannot achieve it.

The saints, then, are all those who have demonstrated to us their attachment to the will of God over their own individual wills. The saints are those who have sought the power of God to transform their lives, to begin in them the conversion from the things of self to the things of the kingdom of God, wherever and whenever

it exists. The saints are those who seek purity in conforming to the purity of God, and in so doing, begin the work of purity within themselves. The saints are those who are faithful in worship and praise, those whose voices join the hosts of heaven in singing ceaseless praises to God and the Lamb. The saints are not perfect, nor are they miracle workers; in many ways they are simply people like us who have taken the risk to truly believe in the transformational power of God. In their example we have a sense of what we, too, might be. In them, we know that the power of God can do extraordinary things, and have the inkling that God can do the same in us.

So, are we saints, too? No one that I know of easily uses the word “saint” to refer to themselves. To do so would be spiritual hubris of a degree that we cannot imagine. Yet we are saints—we are all saints—in the sense listed above. There is in all people, I believe, a “God-shaped hole”—a place of longing and seeking within ourselves that only God can fill. There are sins of all kinds that can be washed away in the blood of the Lamb. There is a yearning for purity and sanctity that only the power of the Holy Spirit can satisfy. We have seen this in others, our spiritual ancestors in the faith, the ones we call saints. These same things are in us, to be nurtured and cultivated. If we cannot think of ourselves as saints, perhaps we can think of ourselves as “saints in training,” those who seek to follow the spiritual path of those before us.

The celebration of All Saints makes sense, finally, in overcoming our cultural and religious notions of sainthood, sanctity, and purity. These concepts have been centered on the human self and idealized to the degree that we cannot hope to achieve them. Thankfully, the grace of God is powerful enough to pull us out of our own self-centeredness for our own good. We have the chance to put our lives in God’s hands and to conform our wills to that of God. Then we can begin the process of being transformed by God into saints—something that we are already and that we will be in perfection in the kingdom of God. ⊕

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