

“Saintly Discipleship”
Matthew 5:1-12

Pastor Mark McDaniel
October 29, 2017

A Wisconsin mom was trying to teach her kids how God sees them. She told them that when they receive Jesus as Savior that he then sees them clean and without sin. Actually, he sees them as saints. So, she began to call them Saint Sam and Saint Mylee and Saint Charlie. She kept this up all week, calling them her little saints. Then, towards the end of the week, the family was going for a ride in the car when Charlie said, "Can I ask an important question?" This prompted the parent's curiosity, so they answered, "Sure." Then the boy proclaimed, "I don't want to be a Saint; can I be a Packer instead?"

This Wednesday is All Saints' Day – a feast day that was originated by the Catholic Church. It is not a Holy day celebrated by all Protestant denominations, but it is celebrated by some. Growing up in the Catholic Church, we talked a lot about the saints. I would guess that even those of you who didn't grow up in the Catholic Church could name several of the saints. St. Patrick, St. Francis, St. Nicholas. You are probably aware of churches in this area named after saints: St. Phillip, St. Peter's, there is even a St. John Presbyterian Church in New Albany, IN—which is interesting because Presbyterians don't canonize specific individuals as saints, as the Catholics do.

So why are we, as Presbyterians, talking about All Saints' Day? Because saints are clearly mentioned in the Bible. And the saints mentioned in the Bible are not limited to a few exceptional individuals, but to all followers of Jesus Christ! If you look at Paul's epistle to the Philippians, you will see that he begins with, *"To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons"* and concludes with, *"Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household."*

Of course, just because Paul identifies us as saints doesn't mean we are perfect—far from it! We can't all be Mother Teresa's. We are just regular folks, trying to be faithful, trying to be obedient, trying to be imitators of Jesus Christ.

So, today we celebrate the saints—both those living and those who have gone home to be with God. We celebrate the unity we have with the living saints, and we celebrate the connection with the saints who have gone before us. And, as we celebrate, we remember those people who have mentored and guided us on our journey toward discipleship. Not only have they taught us, but they have also modeled for us what it means to be a disciple.

So, now we are the saints entrusted by God to be a model for a new generation of saints. However, we seem to find ourselves in a church culture far different from that of our parents or grandparents. They were brought to church to learn to be respectable people. It was in church that they were taught the values of society. They were taught how to be respectable citizens. They came to church, participated in the programs, put money in the plate, and prayed for their community.

However, we can see that the world has become more diverse, which is a good thing; but, at the same time it has also become less unified. Today, we can see how the church's role in society has become much less clear. The church is not the center of community life anymore. There are just too many other competing alternatives. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that many folks are beginning to see church as irrelevant and a waste of time, but I don't believe it is the only reason.

So, as we consider the newest cultural attitude towards the church, we have these verses from the book of Revelation with which to struggle.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

So, what exactly is God up to? On this day in which we celebrate the saints of the past, how do we understand the role of the saints of the present—and the future? Have we become something other than what God wants us to be as the church, or are these just the growing pains of becoming something new?

Ronald Knox, an English priest, said: *"The whole story of the Church is one which imitates the story of her divine Master; she dies, and she rises again. She was buried in the catacombs; she rose again with Constantine. She died in the Dark Ages; she rose again with Charlemagne. She died with the Renaissance; she rose again with the saints of the Reformation."*

The church of our parents and grandparents was focused more on making people good citizens than it was on making them Disciples of Christ.

When I became deeply involved in the church at the age of 15, I can remember some of my friends saying, *"I suppose now that you're going to church you'll start acting all holy."* Actually, I thought I would, as well. However, it soon became apparent to me that I was still the same old me. My church talked about the Bible and Jesus and all that other religious stuff, but no one ever talked to me about discipleship. It seemed to me that joining the church was the goal, rather than a means to being part of the new things which God was doing in the world. It took me many years of spiritual struggle, seminary, and a few years as a church pastor to understand that living as a Christian means not only having a faith but also living a faith. Being a disciple of Jesus involves not only being a Christian, but doing Christianity. If our faith doesn't change us, then perhaps it is a false faith.

As God's Saints and Jesus' disciples, we represent a glimpse of the new thing that God speaks of in our Scripture for today—a new world – a different world. When we gather at the communion table we celebrate God's presence in our midst; when we interact with each other we do so as a forgiven people who are reconciled in Christ; when we make decisions about our life together we are a prayerful people. As Saints and Disciples, it is our responsibility to love and bless the world on behalf of God.

As we talk about being both saint and disciple, it is most appropriate that we do so as we move into our Stewardship Drive. Those of us in this sanctuary this morning are the beneficiaries of the stewardship of generation upon generation of believing saints. Their faith, generosity, and dedication built and sustained the church. They put God first: they prayed, they studied, they served. They understood that being a disciple of Jesus Christ—being a saint of God—being the church—was more than simply paying lip service to a vague faith.

Saints and disciples—past, present, and future—know that no matter what we are going through in life, God is there and will help us. We continue our journey with God, trusting that God will supply our daily needs, and the needs of the world.

The vision of John reveals to us that one day all the saints will gather around the throne of God—God and us—the New Jerusalem. We are received by God's grace as saints and disciples, and we show our gratitude by our obedience and our stewardship; our stewardship of prayer; our stewardship of Scripture; our stewardship of faith; our stewardship of money; and our stewardship of service. It is in this way that we connect with the saints of the past, and prepare the saints of the future. AMEN