

Saints, Handkerchiefs and Children of God

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Nancy Turner Jones at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, November 2, 2008.

One of my earliest memories of childhood is my father's white handkerchiefs. Like most men, he always carried one - large ones that could absorb any amount of stuff, sweat or spill. Of course, with children around there were plenty of opportunities for mishaps and my father was there, handkerchief in hand, ready to clean up. But the reason I think I remember his handkerchiefs the most comes when I was ill. We had *Kleenex* then, or I guess here in Procter & Gamble country I should say *Puffs* - but they weren't soft like the ones today. Today's tissues have lotion and all kinds of things to make them smooth. But eons ago when I was a child, even the best tissue wasn't soft, it irritated your face and didn't stand up to the constant wiping of a child with a cold.

So my mother would reach down into the bottom of my father's drawer and pull out, not the finest, pressed white linen, ---but the oldest, well washed battered handkerchief she could find - because she knew it would be the softest, gentlest, least abrasive on a child's red nose. I can still remember the coolness and softness of that hanky on my sore, chapped nose. Fredrich Buechner¹ in his usual wit calls the saints of history handkerchiefs, pocket handkerchiefs that in God's daily business with the world God occasionally drops into a hurting world. And so today, we celebrate - God's business of dropping saints into our world.

We can't begin to name all that our tradition lifts up as saints, names like William Wilberforce, a member of the English parliament who worked tirelessly to end slavery in England . Or Sojourner Truth, who was called the "Miriam of the later Exodus." And we can't forget St. Francis, standing barefoot in the snow, with birds on his shoulders and animals all around. Probably the most recent saint that we could all name would be Mother Teresa, who not too long ago was added to the Roman roster of "the most blessed". If anyone qualifies for that title, her humility in five decades of helping the poor in Calcutta put her at the top of my list.

Actually by Vatican statistics the former Pope - Paul canonized 476 saints in his time as pope - a record number. If we follow the pope's criteria, first of all we must be dead - for five years. And there must be testimony and documentation of heroic virtue and fidelity to God's grace, in other words a person whose life was a source of miraculous inspiration to the faithful. So, to be a saint - what does that mean? If your child or grandchild asks you today- what will you say?

Many people think of saints as plastic icons, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed their whole lives long. But real saints never come close to characterizing themselves that way. Legend has it that poor Saint Frances rolled naked in the snow to block out his own lusty thoughts. And even Mother Teresa confessed in her journal of dark nights of doubt, confusion and even despair in her prayer life and call to serve. Being a saint is not about always getting it right. Being a saint is about being faithful and their sainthood consists less of what they have done than of what God has for some reason chosen to do through them.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 110.

Last week we read about Moses death and are told that that the people weep for thirty days. Why are they weeping? Those people had a very difficult time with Moses. He was not the most dynamic leader, a seemingly impatient man who often lost his temper, and even failed in his life's work, leading his people into the Promised Land. For forty years he doggedly pushed the Israelites through the wilderness, only to die before the final leg of the journey. But the people wept – not because Moses had been “successful” but because Moses had been faithful, even in his shortcomings. So if we learn nothing else from the stories, we discover that there is maybe nobody God can't use as a means of grace including even ourselves. That being a saint is not about following rules, or about being perfect or holy.

In a few minutes we will light candles, read names and remember some special lights in our own lives. I know that this year and in past years, many of you have lost someone for whom you cared deeply. This communion of saints is a more familiar crowd and hopefully each of you has someone who was a saint in your life. Mine is my grandmother, a woman who, near the end of her eighty year life, shared openly with me, her long ago desire to go to college. It was an intense yearning – expressed to her first granddaughter in college. At the time I did not realize the significance of that for her. She wanted to be a teacher, but that was impossible because of the time in which she was born and the circumstances of her life.

She was the oldest daughter of a Lutheran pastor, and after her mother passed away, was charged with the care of the household and younger siblings. She helped to send her brothers to college and three of them eventually to seminary. She never made it to college – but she certainly was a teacher – to her granddaughter, who she taught to bake and sew, and to a host of other children she taught in Sunday School – a saint indeed. I very likely would not be standing here today without her.

Today, on this All Saints Sunday we honor those whom we carry within us every day, those who may have helped form us in the faith. We lift up those saints – of history and our own ancestors in the faith. We are here because of God working in those saints – with bold decisions and sacrifices; fighting for religious freedom and spreading the gospel. They did all these things because of their faith, but also because of us – to make sure the gospel – the good news was here for us. We are here today because of those saints, their faith, their devotion, their generosity, wonderful stewards.

Today we look backward, yes – but we also look forward. One of these All Saints Days our own names will be read. We are potential saints – for those who come after us, saints for a generation yet unborn. We are the shoulders on which others might stand. I ask you today - what kind of shoulders will they be? Will they be shoulders shrugged in apathy or shoulders of justice and equality? Will they be shoulders too caught up in our own busy lives to lend a hand or shoulders and hands reaching out to others, to strengthen this community? Will they be shoulders shrugged in indifference, or working to build a legacy of community – of hope and forgiveness and love?

In a few minutes we will sing a hymn with the words ‘They were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping, to be one too.’² “I Sing A Song of the Saints of God” was written by a mother for her own three children as a reminder that sainthood is a possibility even in the

²*I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, Lesbia Scott, (b. 1898) Oxford University Press.

context of the average person in the average daily life. We can all be saints. We have the same light shining in us, the image of God. We know that we do not have to be famous, or perfect, or even dead. We belong to God and all that remains to be seen is what we will do about it.

So, when your child comes out of SS today, you can ask him “what is a saint?” Don’t let them get confused about Santa’s list of being naughty and nice with God’s list of the Book of Life. Remind them everyday that the light of God shines through them. Oh, and you can remind yourself and them that we don’t have to do it alone. We have this company, this communion of saints, this multitude of worn and ragged, but soft and loving handkerchiefs sitting with us – see them all around us. Because we are the body of Christ, we are the multitude of saints, we are children of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.