

What You Need To Be A Saint

Matthew 5

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on November 1, 2020

Some months ago I turned on the car radio and some author being interviewed was saying this: “One of the strange conventions that has done harm to our literature is the idea that good people are not interesting.” That line just hit me between the eyes. How deeply and completely true, I thought. And it applies even more widely than to the world of literature. Look at the news that gets pushed to the top of our feeds. Scroll through any of your now thirteen streaming services. It’s the Kardashians we keep up with. Every Ironman needs an ego. Every detective finds that they must go around the law to preserve it. Even that pint-sized puppet of pure innocence, Baby Yoda, must come packaged with a murderous mercenary. This is the way.

The speaker’s point was: shouldn’t good people be *more* interesting? Isn’t being bad the easiest, most common thing there is? What, after all, is more intriguing than someone who in this difficult life, with these broken desires, under the weight of these powers and principalities, manages to rise above what is easy and common to attain some degree of goodness?

This is what the feast of All Saints is about. It is a day to celebrate and remember those Christians who have gone before us who managed to do one of the hardest things of all: to live deeply holy lives. It is important to point out that it is this—holy living—that is really the thing that all the saints have in common. Not all of them were fed to lions in the coliseum for refusing to renounce their faith like Ignatius or assassinated for their public pursuit of civil rights like Martin Luther King Jr. Not all of them lived lives of radical asceticism, like St. Antony of Egypt who simply moved to the desert and devoted his life to solitude and prayer, or like St. Francis who renounced material possessions to live a life wholly dependent on the hospitality of others.

Some saints lived very simple, non-dramatic lives of obedience and faithfulness to God in non-dramatic circumstances. Some were just parish priests who lived out their vocation with humility and faithfulness and who wrote some nice poetry along the way, like George Herbert or John Donne. Some devoted their powerful minds to study and writing, like Thomas Aquinas. Some, like Sister Constance and her companions, in the context of the rapid and deadly spread of yellow fever through Memphis in the late 19th century, simply refused to abandon the sick in their care and so stayed behind to care and minister to them while others fled.

The point is, what makes a saint a saint is not necessarily the heroic events of their life. Yes, history cornered many people who we now call saints into circumstances that in retrospect we see as heroic. But what makes a saint a saint is all the holy habits of their life leading up to whatever history threw at them—dramatic or not. The saints are people who lived lives of such complete commitment to God, that whatever circumstance history cornered them into, they reacted to those circumstances in beautiful, holy, and virtuous ways. In ways that when the rest of the world sees them or reads about them, we think to ourselves, that person makes me want to love God more; that person makes me want to live a more holy life myself. That person seems to be a little piece of the kingdom of God here on earth.

Which is why another way to name what the saints share in common is the Beatitudes. They describe those They are the poor in spirit. They are those who mourn. They are the meek. They are those who hunger and thirst

after righteousness. They are the merciful. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. The persecuted. These are not flashy, Marvel-super-hero characteristics. They are disciples who pray, who study the Scriptures, who feed the poor, befriend the lonely, and chase after justice.

There's a French theologian that has a saying that I love: He says there is one tragedy in life, which is to come to the end of it, and to have not become a saint. Now I think you can take that the wrong way. You can take it in a legalistic, beat-you-over-the-head with a "you should be better" kind of shaming way. That's not how I take it and it's not how I think you should. What I like about that is that it confirms what I have been saying so far—being a saint is not about the circumstances of your life but about the inner cultivation of your soul. And more importantly, it also a subtle way of pointing out that the tools one uses, or the habits one cultivates, in the journey of becoming a saint, are things that are available to everyone. Are things available to us.

You have everything you need to become a saint. You have a Bible. You have a church. You have the sacraments. You have access to solitude—some more than others, I know. You have access to the poor, towards who you may act with mercy and hospitality. You can go as deep into God as you like. You can exhaust the depths. You have everything you need to become a saint.

Though I should clarify: the reason to strain towards sainthood is not because saints earn themselves a better mansion in heaven. Salvation is the same for Mother Theresa as it is for the thief on the cross. And straining after sainthood is certainly not a good strategy if what you are after is an easier life. Looking through the liturgical calendar you will notice that saints tend to get killed at higher rates than the average population. But it does seem to me that saints experience a greater degree of peace and true joy than anyone else. If you are interested in attaining higher degrees of peace and joy in your soul, picking up the habits of the saints in your life is a very good idea indeed.

Because we don't know what drama history is to throw at us. We had no idea what this year was going to bring. Yes, it being an election year many of us suspected it wasn't going to be a banner year for happiness, but we had no idea it was going to be, well, this! We don't know what drama or tragedy lies in our future, personally or corporately. The path of least resistance is always to do everything we can to avoid tragedy of any kind coming our way. But saints are people who live their lives in such a way that when tragedy inevitably comes—and if you notice it tends to come for just about all of us in different shades eventually—even the most tragic occurrences cannot shake the peaceableness of their soul. They won't renounce their faith even as the lions are released from their bonds.

The bad news is that most of us won't attain capital 'S' sainthood in this life, in terms of being formally canonized by the church. The math just isn't in our favor. But the good news is that we all get there eventually, even if it is on the other side of the grave. The apostle John writes of the baptized: "We are children of God. And when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

We know very little about heaven. But we do know it will be peace and joy with God and one another that never ends. The saints are people who lived in that heaven despite still living in this earth characterized by brokenness and tragedy. On this feast day, their lives ask us a simple question: In this unexpected year, in these difficult circumstances, with these broken desires, under the weight of these principalities and powers, what could be more interesting, what could be better for us and for the world, then to take one more step towards a holy life, to take one more step towards heaven on earth?

Amen.