

It's the first Sunday in November, the Sunday in which we celebrate All Saints Day!

The actual day is November 1st, but we celebrate it today.

Now, if we are going to celebrate saints, that begs the question, how do we define a saint?

And who exactly are we celebrating?

Well, in the Catholic tradition, there is a specific beatification process, which names someone as an official saint of the church.

They get a feast day, and so on and so forth.

In Protestant traditions, this is often the day in which churches remember the people in their congregations who have passed away in the last year.

In other churches, people remember anyone who has died who was saint-like by their estimation.

But I'd like to expand the definition just a bit wider.

I think today should be one in which we celebrate anyone in our lives, either whom we've known personally or a public figure, who has been an inspiration to us.

The fact is, that despite the American rhetoric about independence or using our own bootstraps, none of us got where we are in isolation, none of us are who we are, in isolation.

Each of us is the product of hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people who have had an impact on us throughout our lives.

And a few of those people stand out above and beyond the rest, having had a greater influence on our lives, and those are the people that I suggest we remember and lift up today.

We all have different definitions of what makes someone saint-like to us.

For me, saints are those people who are courageous enough to do what's right, even in the face of societal disapproval.

These are the people who are willing to risk relationships, job security and social reputation, because they truly believe in what they're doing and the difference they hope it will make in the world.

According to Jesus' message that we heard today, I think saints are the people who have eyes to see that the 'losers' of our world are the ones who are blessed in God's realm.

"Why?"

Simply because God always reserves God's most acute attention for those in need, those left behind by the powers that be, those left out of the lavish bounty of the world's produce.

Sometimes called God's preferential treatment of the poor... God is always on the side of the underdog,

God's unfailing and unflagging concern for the losers of this world is etched across the pages of Scripture in letters deep and clear enough for anyone willing to read." (Lose, David. "Losers," www.workingpreacher.org).

And to me, saints are people who know this in their core and live it in their words, thoughts and actions.

Now, my ordination into Christian ministry was 4 years ago this past Friday, on Sunday, November 4th, 2012.

The reason why I had that ceremony and the reason why I am able to serve as your pastor today, is because of someone who was a saint in my life, and I want to tell you about him.

None of you knew this man, except for Lynn and Lee Tirrell.

He isn't alive anymore, as he passed away in 2007, but his name was Francis Xavier Pirazzini and he was my grandfather.

His being my grandfather has little to do with my considering him a saint.

Believe me, there are plenty of folks in my family who I wouldn't give such a label, but I just coincidentally won the genetic lottery by being related to this incredible man.

You see, he knew and more importantly, he lived the message that we heard in Jesus' sermon this morning.

He lived his life in service to those who had less than him, less money, less power, less influence, less of a voice.

He was an ordained UCC pastor, who mostly served large churches, and he was also a conference minister during his career.

The point is that he held powerful positions and, unlike many people, he used his power for good.

He was willing to risk social standing and relationships and prestige to advocate for what was right.

He was always on the side of peace and justice.

In 1969 he was part of the Counter Inaugural Parade during Nixon's inauguration.

It was a big anti-war protest.

They carried caskets down the street parallel to the official inaugural parade, and the caskets were to represent those who were killed in the war.

My grandfather was a pallbearer helping to carry a casket, and after that, our family's phone was tapped by the FBI.

In addition to that, he was part of many peace demonstrations against the Vietnam War and many civil rights demonstrations in the 60's.

In 1976, he was the head the national UCC's fundraising campaign in honor of the U.S. Bicentennial.

The idea was to raise \$17 million dollars for the 6 historically Black colleges that were affiliated with the UCC, and they met the goal.

And if we think the concept of ordaining LGBT people and using inclusive language for God are relatively modern ideas, he was advocating for these things in the 1970's.

He was also involved with getting a Planned Parenthood Clinic established in Ephrata, PA in 1961.

I could go on, but you get the point.

He used his voice and his power to advocate for justice causes and to bring voice to issues that would have otherwise gone unheard of.

But maybe what was more impressive about him, more than all that stuff that he did, was that he was imperfect.

Nobody needs to be perfect to be a saint, and I think that sometimes we conflate the two.

Jesus knew his disciples were about to get it wrong by putting themselves in the way of what Jesus wanted for our world, and God knows that we mere mortals all have the same predicament.

Saints are just ordinary people, dare I say sinners, who are enacting God's love and justice in the world.

My grandfather was quite ordinary.

His family emigrated here from Italy and he went to college on the G.I. Bill.

He actually experienced a lot of racism and discrimination in his life, growing up in New York City, where Italians were often the subjects of discrimination.

A few of the reasons that he inspired me to become a pastor are not because of his saint-like qualities, but because of his imperfections.

For one thing, he was loud, and he had a loud laugh.

And sometimes his sense of humor was a little off color.

And sometimes he spoke before he thought and said things that were insensitive.

Sometimes he was rough around the edges and didn't always display a perfectly "pastoral" presence.

When I thought about the reasons why I didn't think I could become a pastor, it was because I didn't think I was nice enough, tolerant enough or patient enough.

But when I remembered that someone like him, with those same flaws, could not only be a pastor, but change the world, I figured that I could at least give it a shot.

This is who saints are, they're not only good people, but they inspire us to be better people.

Their legacy lives on long after they are gone because of the lives they touched.

These people must not be forgotten, for it is on their shoulders that we stand.

It is our responsibility to pick up the mantle from where they left off and continue to change the world, just as they picked up the mantle from their forbearers.

Now, I shared with you all about my grandfather, a saint in my life, but I know that many of you have people who have been saints in your lives and some of you offered to share your stories.

First, I'd like to invite Gail Ciano forward to tell us about someone who has been a saint in her life...

Now, I'd like to invite Kendra Griep to come forward...

*Holy One,
We thank you for the saints in our lives and for the courage it takes to share our testimonies about them. May we continue to talk about and remember those who have shown us the way to your love, that their examples might continue to enrich and inform our lives. Amen.*