

So, today is the Sunday after All Saints Day, which is Nov. 1st., which means that it is All Saints Sunday.

This is the Sunday in which we venerate, or lift up, those people in our lives that have been saints to us.

It's traditional to remember those who have passed away, but we can also celebrate those who are still living who have been saints in our lives, or have otherwise shown us God's love.

Because of today's theme, saints, I want to share a story with you all, and it goes like this...

"There's a story of a good man who dies and goes to heaven, and who is welcomed at the pearly gates, which are thrown open for him to enter.

He goes through them in a daze of bliss, because it is everything he has been taught, golden streets, milk and alabaster and honey and golden harps.

He wanders the streets lost in happiness, until after a while he realizes that he is all alone; he hasn't seen anybody at all.

He walks and walks, and he sees nobody.

So he goes back to the gates, and he asks, "Peter?"

"Yes, my son?"

"This really is heaven?"

"Oh, yes, my son. Don't you like it?"

"Oh, it's just wonderful! But where is everybody? Where are the prophets? Where is the Holy Family? Where are the saints?"

Peter looks at him kindly. "Oh, them? They're all down in hell, ministering to the damned. If you'd like to join them, I'll show you the way."

That story is by Madeline L'Engle and was published in her book [A Stone for a Pillow](#).

I suppose that for those of us who are trying to do the right thing, we aren't off the hook just because we've gotten to heaven.

I don't know if it's reassuring or burdensome to think about the need for us to spread the Gospel message in the afterlife.

But what I love about this story is that everyone who went to heaven, decided to go to hell to hang out with the people down there.

Nobody decided to stay behind in heaven, not a single soul.

Maybe that's because they were saints, or maybe it's because they were just good people, who tried to do the right thing on earth, got their ticket to heaven, then continued to do the right thing by going to spend time with the folks in hell.

You see, part of my job as a pastor is that I have the privilege of doing *a lot* of funerals.

In fact, I went back and counted my files, and since I have been at this church, I have done 63 funerals.

That averages out to being more than one per month.

Because I have the ability to spend so much time with people who have lost loved ones, I have witnessed how we venerate those who have died.

It doesn't matter how unpleasant they might have been when they were alive, after people die, we raise them up like they were God's gift to the world.

This has taught me that we *all* have redeemable characteristics, we all have some kind of positive impact on our families, and our loved ones.

You can take comfort in the knowledge that after you die, your family will definitely have kind things to say about you.

They always do.

I have never met a family who was planning a funeral or memorial service who had NOTHING nice to say about their loved one.

In fact, we probably err too much on the side of singing their praises.

We lift people up so high after they pass away.

This behavior has taught me two things: either we are all saints, or none of us are saints.

It's either all or none, I will tell you why I don't think it's right for humanity to be divided into 2 classes, some sinners and some saints.

The thing is that when you lift someone up, when you put them on a pedestal and praise them as being the best that humanity can be, it makes them untouchable.

It makes it impossible for us to emulate them because we will never be as perfect as that person was.

You can fill in the blank with who "that person," is because I am sure we all know different people whose praises we would sing for being saint-like.

But if they're so far above us that we can't measure up, then we won't try.

We tell ourselves that we can never be as loving, peaceful, forgiving, as understanding, or as God-like as that person.

And so rather than them being an inspiration to us to try harder to live into the Gospel message, there's a risk that we'll adopt the defeatist mentality, and say, "well I could never do *that*, I could never be as good as they are."

And then we don't even try, it becomes an excuse for us to not live into Jesus' call for us to be disciples.

But the other problem with lifting people up so high on that unreachable pedestal is that it means that they have so very far to fall.

But we can't risk their falling, because we never want our heroes to fall, and so instead we ignore their imperfections.

We ignore that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy were womanizers

or that Ghandi was racist,

or that Martin Luther, who I spoke highly of last week, was an anti-Semite,

or that Mother Theresa, whom we love to love, used her power and influence to coerce Hindu people to convert to Catholicism.

See, we don't like thinking about the shadow sides of those whom we have lifted up, it makes us uncomfortable.

This is why it's dangerous to put them on that sky-high pedestal.

Not only do they become unreachable, but we refuse to allow ourselves to see them as fully human, saint and sinner all wrapped into one.

It shatters our conception of perfection, because if they weren't perfect, then who can be?!

Calling people saints, prevents us from owning the good news, that nobody is perfect, but that we're all given new chances, all the time to be more Christ-like.

In reality, we are all some combination of sinner and saint.

On our better days we are more saint-like and on our worse days, we skew towards sinner.

To me, that's what's so remarkable about saints is that they're unremarkable.

They're just normal people trying to do good, trying to have more saintly days than sinner days, trying, with each step to walk in Christ's footsteps.

Saints are humble, they blend in, they go around quietly doing good and not calling attention to themselves but calling attention to the needs of others.

“Saint Anthony said that in his solitude, he sometimes encountered devils who looked like angels, and other times he found angels who looked like devils.

When asked how he could tell the difference, St. Anthony said that you can only tell which is which by the way you feel after the creature has left your company.” (Gilbert, Elizabeth. Eat, Pray, Love.)

You might meet someone one time in your life but they leave such an indelible impact on you, because of something they said or did, that they will always live on in your mind as a saint.

They might not even know the impact they had on you.

Perhaps we are each a saint to someone and we don't even know it.

Saints make God's love real and tangible in this world, as I said to the kids earlier, they are people through whom God shines.

We all have our saintly moments.

I know this because I have sat with people who are grieving loved ones, and every person whom I have done a funeral for, has had a profound impact on the lives of others.

We have all allowed God's light shine through us at one time or another, even those who of us who think we are just ordinary.

Nelson Mandela famously said, *"I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying."*

Even he had that sinner within him.

We all do.

But the good news is that we all have the saint within us too.

Don't downplay the light that you have to give to the world, don't allow yourself to feel small and inconsequential compared to those giants whom we lift up as Saints with a capital "s."

As soon as you get into that thought pattern, you are denying the world the light that you have within.

Don't measure yourself against others, just do the best you can, day after day, one foot in front of the other.

If you mess up, it's a chance to apologize, repent and start over the next day.

And for me, each time I mess up by being a little more sinful and a little less saintly, it's a wakeup call about how far I've strayed

from who I want to be, and those errors tend to land me back on the right track.

They put me back onto the path that Jesus laid out for us in his sermon on the Beatitudes, that we heard in the scripture lesson this morning.

My errors remind me of the profound importance of humility, peacemaking, mercy and meekness, all in my relentless pursuit for justice and righteousness.

So, beloved ones, on this All Saints Sunday, go ahead and lift up those people who have been saints to you in your life, but don't allow them to dim your light.

Remember that we are all saints, and I suggest we share this good news with one another while we are alive, rather than waiting to say it until after we die.

So, if someone has had an impact on your life, tell them, let them know that they made you feel different, that God's love shined through them.

If we all did this, I bet we would all hear it from someone else.

Because saints are as ordinary as you and me.

And that's what's so extraordinary. Amen.