

## BEING SAINTS

*When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

*John 11: 32-44*

Up until just a few years ago, I would often make a drive south on Highway 65 to Ackley to attend to some kind of presbytery business. And just about 15 miles south of Hampton, on the east side of the highway, there is what remains of a small cemetery. Every time I would drive by, I would notice it—less than a quarter acre of land fenced off from the surrounding corn field; two or three ancient trees; a scattering of broken and fallen stones. Someone mows the grass now and then; and someone has made a pile of broken headstones under one of the ancient trees. And the clear spaces indicate that there are many unmarked, and long forgotten graves there. One day, about six years ago, I was early to my meeting and had time to pull over. It was late in the afternoon in August. I spent about half an hour just wandering through the dozen or so remaining stones. Only about three or four were in good enough shape to read the names and dates; the rest were broken and the limestone worn down so that you could make out that something, somebody's name and dates of their birth and death had once been carved into them; but it was no longer possible to read them. I'm sure that by now, there are even fewer that are legible.

I remember wondering who these people were; where they came from; how they came to this final resting place. I wondered then, as I wonder to this day, if anyone remembers or knows who these saints were. I wonder if anyone will be remembering them today on All Saints Day?

This is the time of year when we remember those in our church family who have died and we give thanks to God for the gift of their life among us. All Saints Day was originally a time to commemorate the martyrs of the church, those who gave their lives for the gospel. Now we think more in terms of those who *lived* their lives by and for the gospel. And when we think of saints, often we bring to mind people who are remembered for their good works or pure lives—St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa. We hold up their lives as exemplary, as models of Christian living. But even as we do so there is always that gnawing recognition that we will never reach that level of sanctity and goodness.

We may consider sainthood an exclusive club of which we have little chance of membership. We may even consider that our own membership in that club would lower the standard. We may be like Groucho Marx, who gave up his membership in an exclusive Hollywood club. He said, "I don't want to belong to any club that would have *me* as a member."

So, what about Lazarus, whose remarkable story we read from John's gospel? Is he a saint? Well, we might think so because, after all, his story is told in the Bible.

But then, the Bible also includes the story of Jacob, the scheming, con artist who hoodwinked his brother and even his old father out of the family fortune. And what about Rahab, the prostitute. Her story is in the Bible, too. Are these the kind of folks we want to be associated with? Maybe we're thinking, "I don't want to belong to any club that would have *them* as a member."

Yeah, but the Lazarus story is different, isn't it? After all, Lazarus was a friend of Jesus. Doesn't that count for something when it comes to sainthood?

But, then, so was Peter, who betrayed Jesus in his time of need. So was Judas, for that matter.

So what do you have to do to be included in the roll-call of saints? What did Lazarus do to deserve a second go-round in life? Come to think of it, we don't really know much about Lazarus. We know more about his sisters, Mary and Martha. For all we know he could have been a scoundrel like Zacchaeus, the biggest tax cheat in all of Jericho.

But the two things we do know about Lazarus may be the most important. We know that Jesus loved him; and we know that Jesus wept over him when he died. Jesus acknowledges the reality and the pain of death and loss and grief. And in his own tears he acknowledges the worth and value of the one who died. He makes a statement not only about death and resurrection, but also about memory. Lazarus was remembered and grieved because his life made a difference and his loss leaves an emptiness. What Jesus acknowledges here is a memory and a communion that goes beyond this life.

And in Isaiah, that communion of saints happens around a table. There is a table, as Isaiah describes it, where God has set out a rich feast and good wines. There is a God who has swallowed up death, who not only weeps with us, but also reached down to wipe away the tears from all faces. And this table is set for all peoples, the good, the bad, even the ugly.

One of my favorite movies is "Places in the Heart." Set in the small town of Waxahachie, Texas in the 1930s, in the heart of the Depression, the movie opens with the accidental shooting of the young sheriff by an even younger black man. The rest of the movie tells the story of Edna, the sheriff's young widow, who is left on her own to raise their two children and bring in a cotton crop in order to pay the mortgage, save her home and keep her family together. It is the story of how she takes risks: first taking in a migrant worker who convinces her he knows everything there is to know about raising cotton, then agreeing to take in as a boarder the blind brother-in-law of the banker who is threatening to foreclose on her mortgage. Together, these strangers overcome all kinds of obstacles and disasters, including a tornado, and almost kill themselves harvesting a cotton crop. But along the way they also find a strength and a grace that pulls them together as a family.

But it is also the story of a community and what divides them and what draws them together. It is the story of blatant racism and the intimidation of the Ku Klux Klan; of an

extra-marital affair that threatens to destroy a home. It is the story of how powerful bankers and cotton gin owners try to take advantage of a vulnerable widow.

It would have been easy for the writer and director, Robert Benton, to give this movie a typical Hollywood ending, where the goodness of Edna, and her new-found family wins out over the evil bankers and Klansmen. And in a way, that does happen. She not only gets her crop in, she has the good fortune to be the first in line at the cotton gin, and to receive the prize money for producing the first bale of cotton in the county. But none of this Hollywood happy ending stuff prepares you for the final scene of the movie. No matter how many times you see this movie, it remains one of the most moving scenes you'll see.

The scene is the little Baptist church on a Sunday morning. After a hymn the minister speaks the words of institution and the plate of bread and tray of cups are passed around. The camera slowly follows the path of the elements as they are passed and we recognize the faces of the characters from the movie. The couple who have been having marital difficulties are there, sitting together. The itinerant band members who play for dances are there along with the women that follow them. And then we begin to notice something strange going on here. The family that we saw killed in their car by the tornado are all there too, and they pass the cup to the shady banker and the KKK members who pass it to the black migrant worker and the blind boarder. And in the final frame, Edna passes the cup to her husband who was killed at the beginning of this story—but there he is. And with a slightly startled face, he turns and looks and then serves the young black man who shot him. It is an image in which, as one reviewer describes it, “the living and the dead, the lambs and the wolves, the wronged and the wrongdoers, the betrayed and the betrayers” are all brought together as one, in communion with Christ and with each other.

It is here, as we come to Christ's table, that sinners are welcomed, received, fed, and set on their way to becoming saints. It is here that, as we remember Christ, we are also remembered. Here we have communion with Christ and with all the saints in the present time and all the saints who have gone on before us. Even those whose names have been forgotten years ago, whose names have faded from those stones in that forgotten cemetery south of Hampton.

What did Lazarus, or Peter, or Jacob, or Rahab do to become saints? Nothing. They are not saints because of what they did, nor are they excluded from sainthood because of what they did or failed to do. Of course, we still hold up the Good Samaritan and Mother Theresa and Mr. Rogers and all those mentors in our own lives who have set an example for us of how to live out the gospel. And, of course, we know that we are called to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. But being saints has little to do with who we are and what we do and has everything to do with who God is and what God, in Christ, has already done. Our lives are made holy because when we die, Jesus himself weeps over the loss, and because the Creator of all life remembers us for eternity. That is what brings us into communion with all the saints.

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