

“Seek the Lord”

Psalm 34; Matthew 5:1-12

Rev. Jason Alspaugh
First Baptist Church of Dayton
November 6, 2011

The Church has been honoring its saints, its “holy ones” (*hagioi*) for centuries. Around the year 156 C.E., after Polycarp, the bishop in Smyrna, was executed as a martyr, as a witness to his Christian faith, his brothers and sisters in Christ told of how they “took up his bones, more precious than costly stones and more valuable than gold, and laid them away in a suitable place” where “the Lord [would] permit [them...] to gather together in joy and gladness to celebrate the day of his martyrdom as a birthday, in memory of those athletes who [had] gone before, and to train and make ready those who [were] to come [thereafter]” (Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 63-64). We are a part of those who have come after Polycarp and countless people before and after him, men and women, who were faithful to God and who, in the fullness of time, were faithful to God *in Christ*. And so, these candles have been lit, and we have begun to remember...

Today’s message is *for all the saints*—seen and unseen, named and unnamed—whose faithfulness to God in Christ has helped us to be faithful. That is the nature of a saint. As James Wm. McClendon, Jr. puts it, “If holiness is a gift from God, then it is a gift with radiating power [...where saints...] are not beneficiaries, but benefactors.” We light our candles from theirs.

There are those whose words and deeds have made them “giants” in the history of Christian faith and, like the writer of *Hebrews*, we can begin to rattle-off their names, starting with Abel and Noah and Abraham; and yet, for every named and known person in history, I’m sure there are at least ten others who have gone unnoticed, who were just as faithful. They may not have been canonized and put in the calendar; they may not have been memorialized in iconography and stained glass; but they were just as faithful. My mom taught me to be faithful; Ms. Russell taught me to read the Bible; Renee taught me how to pray and how to die; Warren and Wes and a lot of other guys taught me that it was okay to cry in public, especially in worship. And so, while we are honoring *all* the saints today, I want us to give particular

attention to the relatively “unknowns.” I’m talking about the people you have *known* who have helped you in your life of faith. Remember them?

They have been those who ultimately asked one thing of the LORD, and sought that one thing—i.e., that they might dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of their lives, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and seek him in his temple (adapt. Ps. 27:4). They have been our grandmas and grandpas, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, siblings and friends, Sunday school teachers, pastors, and professors. In worship and in daily life, they have taught us to “bless the LORD at all times” and to seek the LORD, to cry out to God, to “taste and see that the LORD is good” and to “take refuge in [God]” (Ps. 34). They have showed us what it means to live out the Beatitudes, to be “poor in spirit,” to “mourn,” to be “meek,” to “hunger and thirst for justice,” to be “full of mercy,” to be “pure in heart,” to be “peacemakers,” and to endure suffering for Christ’s sake. They have showed us how to live and die *in faith, in hope, in Christ*. They showed us what it means to be “the light of the world,” and they have kindled the light of faith within us.

Now I have been speaking of these saints in the past-tense, and that can be misleading, for two reasons. First, though the people we have been thinking about may be dead, they are still with us. They *are*. When the writer in *Hebrews* concludes his litany of the faithful in Chapter 11, he opens Chapter 12 by saying, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...” Friends, we *are* “surrounded” by such “a great cloud of witnesses.” We are surrounded! If you slow down for just a moment, just in this place...can’t you still hear them—their whispers, their laughter, their singing? If you close your eyes, can’t you still see their faces—their smiles, the way they looked when you watched them pray? We *are* surrounded. Secondly, speaking of saints in the past-tense can lead us to think that you have to die in order to be a saint, but that’s just not true. All of the people we’ve been thinking about today were saints long before they died. For those that have died, their dying was one more opportunity to live out their faith in Christ. You don’t have to die to be a saint.

This room is full of saints—unseen *and seen*. Look to your left and your right and there you will see a saint. Look in the mirror. Perhaps you don’t believe me. You deny it. Perhaps it’s easier for us to grant sainthood to those who have died. It’s harder for them to deny it. But (amen) I tell you, this room is full of saints. You might deny it for yourself, and you’d probably be right to do so, because the moment you claim sainthood for yourself someone might just dismiss you as an arrogant, holier-than-thou, you-know-what. Or you might deny it because

you think you're unworthy of the title. You'd rather be called an "ain't"; it seems to be a more fit description; and maybe it is. But being a saint is not about perfection, it's about pursuit.

Lots of saints were so-called "ain'ts" somewhere along the way; but that is not where they rested. They pursued the LORD, they sought God, mostly because God sought them. They could be saints, they could be faithful, because God is faithful; and so can we. One of the morning prayers I often pray opens with a series of questions and answers, calls and responses. The first question asks, "Who is it that you seek?" There are many people and things that a person can seek in life, and the answer can determine a lot about the way a life is lived, so this is an important question at the start of any day—Who or what will we seek? Will we seek our own good before that of others? Will we seek wealth? Will we seek to please everyone? Will we seek praise for ourselves? Who is it that *you* seek? The answer in this morning-prayer is, "**We seek the Lord our God.**" And, as if to test our sincerity, or to remind us of what seeking the Lord our God entails, the litany of questions and answers continues:

Do you seek [God] with all your heart?

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Do you seek [God] with all your soul?

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Do you seek [God] with all your mind?

Amen. Lord, have mercy.

Do you seek [God] with all your strength?

Amen. Christ, have mercy.

As I reflected on this call and response, it was easy for me to understand the Amen's—"Amen" is like saying "Yes."—but I wondered about the responses, "Lord, have mercy," and, "Christ, have mercy." And then it dawned on me that in seeking the Lord our God, we need mercy. We need God's mercy and grace, the forgiveness we find in Christ, in order to be faithful to God, because (let's face it) we're not always faithful. In his Letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul wrote:

All of us once lived [...] in the passions of our flesh [...] and we were by nature children of wrath [...] But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ [...] For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God

[...] For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Eph. 2:3-9).

So yes, amen, and Christ have mercy on us, so we can be “in that number” of saints, so we can live this “way of life.”

If we have indeed received such grace and mercy, then there’s no denying it: this room is full of saints. And it’s important for us to accept and live out our sainthood, as people who do their very best to seek the LORD and be faithful to the way of Christ, just as those who have gone before us; because if we do not, then those who come after us may not. You see, this room and this world is not only full of saints, but of would-be-saints. So “seek the LORD while he may be found,” and be faithful. Do it “[f]or all the saints, who from their labors rest.” Do it for all the saints among us, who help us discover our own sainthood. Do it for all the saints yet to be. Amen. And Lord, have mercy.