

## “Saints in Word and Deed”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

11-1-20 All Saints Sunday

Based upon Psalm 26; Eph. 4:1-6, 14-16

In his book, This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm, author Stephen Plunkett writes: “The electing grace of God *meddles* in our lives. It challenges even our most cherished cultural assumptions and calls us to become a community of dissidents, swimming against the stream.”<sup>1</sup> Do you believe this? Do you feel that your faith requires you to swim against the stream of the surrounding culture at times? Have you been, and are you still willing to swim in that direction? Today, on All Saints Sunday in the Church, we celebrate those who, because of the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ and the meddling of the Spirit, answered those question with an unambiguous “yes.” They chose to give their greatest loyalty to our highest authority as Christians, Jesus Christ, even when doing so required them to swim against the current of their surrounding culture, and for some of them, even when doing so meant losing their lives. Their witness to God’s love in Christ was so visible that it had a lasting impact on others, which is one of the reasons why we honor them today. Another reason is that even though their witness sometimes set them apart from the world, we don’t want it to set them apart from us. Just the opposite. We want their examples to inspire us to live with equal dedication in our discipleship so that we will not only sing, “I sing a song of the saints of God... and I mean to be one too” but mean it and live it.

With this in mind, I thought it would be appropriate for us today, which is not only All Saints Day on the Church’s calendar but also the Sunday before a one of the most critical national elections in our country’s history, to take a few moments to consider who our greatest authority really is, and whom we are prepared to serve above all no matter what. I can’t tell you who to vote for on Tuesday, and I don’t know who will win. But I suspect that regardless of who wins, in the months ahead we will be called upon as Christians to witness to God’s way with a degree of personal investment that past elections have not required of us. Given the divisions in our nation, the odds are good that we will find ourselves having to swim against at least a current or two in the weeks ahead, whether they are created by the elected president or the people around us. So, today the saints who have gone before us ask us to consider whether we have enough integrity and devotion in our faith to avoid the undertow of the surrounding culture, if it ends up being inconsistent with the ways of Christ. Do we desire to be saints more than we desire to be Republicans or Democrats?

Before you tell God your answer to that question, let me remind you that in our Reformed Tradition, saying “yes” does not mean that you are signing up for martyrdom, nor does it mean that you have to be able to work miracles. Although martyrs and miracles-workers are counted among the saints, in our tradition, thankfully, the standards for sainthood are not so high. Like the apostle Paul, we use the term saint to describe all sorts of living, breathing, and faithful Christians, as well as miracle-working, self-sacrificing dead ones. But that being said, you can’t become a saint simply by calling yourself a Christian. You have to walk the talk. As Lawrence

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<sup>1</sup> Plunkett, Stephen W., This We Believe: Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2002), 61.

Cunningham, head of theology at Notre Dame, put it, a saint is “a person so grasped by a religious vision that it becomes central to his or her life in a way that radically changes the person and leads others to glimpse the value of that vision.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is impossible to be a secret, lukewarm, or hypocritical saint. Saints live with so much spiritual integrity and devotion to Jesus Christ, that what they say they believe they live, and how they live their faith witnesses to God’s love in a visible, and often transforming way.

According to this definition, there are two thousand or so year’s-worth of saints in the cloud of witnesses currently cheering us on, many of whom have never been canonized, and many of whom are still living. But while I am grateful for that, I must admit that personally I am most intrigued by those who did put their lives on the line in the past. For example, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century a historian named Eusebius described in disturbing detail, in his history of the early Church, of the way that the Romans in his day used to like to torture and kill Christians if they wouldn’t recant their faith in Jesus and worship a Roman god. Thousands of people endured unimaginable pain and horrific deaths by wild beasts and worse rather than say they did not believe that Jesus was Lord. They did this even though they lived centuries after Jesus lived and never met him themselves. One of those people was a woman named Perpetua, whom some of us learned about in the Women of Faith class I offered a while back. Perpetua refused to recant her faith even when it meant losing her husband and child, and ultimately her own life. Would you do that? I don’t know, myself, if I could.

Then there are the people of more recent generations, people who stood up for the ways of Christ when the threat to their lives was from Nazis not wild beasts. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and how he returned to Germany to stand for the true Gospel when Hitler began to appropriate the German Evangelical Church for his own purposes. One of the ways Bonhoeffer did this was by joining with contemporaries, including the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century “Father of Neo-orthodoxy” Karl Barth, to form something called the Confessing church, which stood as an alternative to the German Christian Church. The Confessing Church adopted as its statement of faith a bold affirmation called the “Theological Declaration of Barmen.” It’s included in our *Book of Confessions*.<sup>3</sup> The Declaration has nothing to do with drinking— Barmen was a city in Germany, not a club of drinking buddies. The Declaration names six ways that the prevailing views of the Third Reich’s so called “German Christians” were inconsistent with the Gospel. Barth and others wanted to make it clear publicly that there was a difference between the Gospel and German nationalism, and to make it clear that Christians were called to serve Jesus before Hitler. “We reject,” Point Two proclaims, “the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to others lords— areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.” “We reject,” Point Three proclaims, “the false doctrine, as though the Church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, Lawrence, [The Meaning of Saints](#) (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 65.

<sup>3</sup> [The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA: Part I Book of Confessions](#) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church USA), 1994), 253-58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* at 257.

These people are real standouts among the saints because of their faithfulness. But as today's lesson from *Ephesians* reminds us, even in times of relative peace, saints in training have had to be discerning and dedicated in order to avoid falling for false gospels birthed by the world. We don't know who exactly was distorting the Gospel or appropriating it for reasons that were contrary to Christ's way when the letter was written. It was written before the great persecutions began. But the author perceived the threat to be serious enough that he offered today's simple and yet challenging advice: "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

In this text, instead of describing the threat to spiritual integrity as a cultural current, the author adopts the metaphor of errant winds, which toss believers about and confuse them. But the point is the same. There are people and powers and ideologies which want our allegiance and loyalty above all, forces which are contrary to the way of Christ. The most insidious of them are those which try to cloak their behavior in the Gospel. They may equate nationalism with serving Christ or call for violence. Whatever their claims, in times of unrest especially, it's easy for us to get so caught up in our own preferences and fears that we forget or confuse the false gospels of contemporary messengers with our charge as Jesus' disciples. That's why our denomination tends to write and adopt confessions of faith during times of civic unrest. "This is what we believe," we proclaim as much to ourselves as to those who would listen to us. "These are the moral and spiritual boundaries of our lives."

Since it can be hard to know if your heart is being moved by an errant wind or the winds of the Spirit, especially today when people can't even agree on what is fake and what is fact, I went back to look at two of the more recent confessions which were born out of times of crisis in the last century to see what they teach us about those the moral and spiritual boundaries of discipleship. The first was the Barmen Declaration I mentioned. The other was the *Confession of 1967*, which was written in response to the turmoil of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> The Barmen Declaration reduces the Gospel to six essentials of discipleship that touch upon authority, loyalty, liberty, and justice. Jesus Christ is our greatest authority, the Declaration makes clear, greater than the Church itself, as well as our national authorities, friends, and families. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection proclaim that he is Lord above all. Because he liberated us from the consequences of sin, we give our greatest loyalty to him, the loyalty of our whole selves. We can't be loyal to him only on Sundays and to other things the rest of the week, or to him with part of our hearts and to others with the rest, nor are we free to change or disregard his teachings to please worldly authorities or follow popular trends. One of the things Jesus teaches is that the State's job is to promote justice and peace. We are grateful when it does this. But if the State does not promote these things then we must adhere to the teachings of Christ which are grounded in God's righteousness, justice, and love. Our calling is to proclaim the freeing grace of God for all people, and to invite people into faith, hope, and love, for God's glory, not our own.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* at 259-270.

The *Confession of 1967* is much more specific in its naming of specific social positions and actions that flow from discipleship which it believes lead to justice and peace. Our job as Christians, it proclaims, is to work for the well-being of all. As we affirmed just last week when we read an excerpt from this Confession, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ set the pattern for the Church's mission. "His suffering makes the church sensitive to all human suffering so that it sees the face of Christ in the faces of persons in every kind of need. His crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment on the inhumanity that marks human relations, and the awful consequences of the church's own complicity in injustice."<sup>6</sup> Thus we stand for reconciliation and against injustice. We stand against discrimination in all aspects of life. Practically speaking, this means, according to the confession, that we must advocate for fair employment, housing, and education, and equal opportunities for leisure, marriage, and the exercise of political rights. We are called to work for the reconciliation of all nations, not just the glorification of our own, as well as for the reconciliation of genders, races, and ethnicities. We are called to work to rid the world of poverty, to care for the most vulnerable, and to preserve and protect God's Creation. To advocate for positions that promote discrimination, oppression, or the careless disregard of the needs of the earth and its inhabitants is contrary to the way of Christ.

"Vindicate me, O Lord," the psalmist prayed, "for I have walked in my integrity.... I do not consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers.... I love the house in which you dwell." It is part of human nature, I think, to want God to ratify all that we believe and do; it's also part of human nature to be hypocritical in at least some aspects of our lives because we all are imperfect sinners. Thus, history records that all kinds of destructive behaviors have been linked with God's will and God's way. Our day is no different. We still hear people doing this, saying things like God made white people superior to people of color, (even though Jesus was not white), or that God loves America more than other nations, (even though Jesus wasn't American), or that God was against non-Christians, (even though Jesus wasn't Christian and came for all people), or that God wants us all to be rich, (even though Jesus told the rich to give everything to the poor). It's easy to co-opt God's name; it's much harder to walk with spiritual integrity in the footsteps of Christ, especially when others around you are not.

But even without the witness of the saints who wrote the Confessions, we still have the witness of those who wrote Scripture. Scripture tells us exactly how Jesus prioritized his life. He put God and neighbor before himself. He prioritized feeding the hungry and healing the sick, embracing the outcast and children and the elderly, and blessing the suffering. He stood for justice even when those around him were unjust, and stood for love when all those around him were filled with hate. Money did not motivate him at all. If you haven't yet voted, think about these things before you do, and if you already have, remember that regardless of who wins and what agenda is adopted, we already have our marching orders from Jesus. We must be in the business of love, reconciliation, and justice, because our greatest loyalty is to the God whose very nature as well as business was these things. We must be allies of the least and most vulnerable because Jesus commanded that we do so.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* at 266 (¶9.32).

This is a loving congregation, which has always been dedicated to helping those in need, so I know that I'm preaching to the proverbial choir today. But all living saints need reminders every now and then when the road ahead gets bumpy and reality and propaganda are hard to distinguish. So, when everything else feels out of control, remember what is in your control—how you respond to the world. Tune your ear to the saints who came before us who are cheering us on today even as we honor them, learn from the Church's experience in other difficult times, and draw strength from the words of Scripture, the grace of God, and the presence of Christ in Communion. One pastor whose work I read this week suggested that people of faith should begin each day by asking themselves: "If the fate of America depended upon my integrity as a follower of Christ tomorrow, how difficult will tomorrow be?"<sup>7</sup> But if you pray the psalmist's prayer each morning, that works well too to remind us of who we serve and who we were made to be. "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you." Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Kirksey, Franklin L., "*Integrity or Hypocrisy: That is the Question!*", PastorLife, Feb. 10, 2013; retrieved from [http://sermons.pastorlife.com/members/sermon.asp?USERID=&SERMON\\_ID=3715](http://sermons.pastorlife.com/members/sermon.asp?USERID=&SERMON_ID=3715)