

Learning from the Saints, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 24051030
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 and Matthew 23:1-12
Elon Community Church United Church of Christ, 30 October, 2005

Halloween can be a confusing time. A few years ago my sister, who lives in Columbus, Ohio, told me how confusing it was there. She had to hand out candy on Thursday night. Columbus decided that because Halloween fell on a Sunday, and Sunday was a school night, they should move it up. Saturday was an Ohio State home football game with Iowa, so they couldn't observe it then. Friday night was a night of high school football, so they couldn't observe it then. They were left with Thursday night as trick or treat night, which is a school night! Go figure!

All this commotion is over Halloween, which is "All Hallow's Eve", which, no matter what our civic leaders might say, is the night before "All Saints Day." All Saints Day is November 1. It is a day to recognize all the saints of the church.

Most every day is a day in honor of a canonized saint. March 17 is the feast of St. Patrick. July 25 is the feast of St. James. All Saints Day covers all the saints, named and un named.

Just to add to the confusion, we do not have worship service on All Saints' Day, so we will remember our saints next week at Elon Community Church.

Who are the saints? They are not just Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin, or Stephen who was first martyr of the church, or Mary who gave birth to a savior. Saints are people like Martin Sholtzberger who was always reading, studying, and growing in the faith, and who spoke out for justice, fairness, and peace. Saints are people like Tom Smith who served as mayor of Elon and who made his way every day to Twin Lakes to feed his wife who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Saints are people like Roberta Starr who loved and cared for each church member both as secretary and in her retirement. Saints are also people like Beth Wilkins who served as a missionary in her younger years, but who today continues to welcome others with a warm smile and who makes visits to check up on others. These saints are examples to us of living the Christian life.

Saints are set apart because of their relationship to God. In the Hebrew Testament the word "saint" translates a word derived from "covenant faithfulness." Those so designated are bound closely to God in love. A saint also is one who is set apart and dedicated to the service of God.

In the New Testament "saint" always translates the Greek term for "the holy ones," those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

In the old *Pilgrim Hymnal* there is a hymn that goes, "I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew. They were, all of them, saints of God, and I mean, God helping, to be one too."

Saints were not perfect. They were human, but they were people who tried to live lives faithful to God, and who showed us a taste of what God's steadfast love is like.

What do we learn from the saints? We remember their kindnesses. We remember their attempts to follow Jesus' examples of compassion, humility, and sacrifice. In today's gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus spoke rather frankly, even harshly, to the crowds about Pharisees. In fact, he spoke so harshly in this passage, we wonder whether Jesus really said these words in this context. Perhaps Matthew, a leader of a Pharisaic Christian synagogue, was having trouble with non-Christian Pharisaic synagogues. We suspect that the non-Christian Pharisaic groups had ex-communicated Matthew and his followers. Perhaps Matthew stretched Jesus' words a bit in order to make his congregation sound a little better.

Really, now, the Pharisees were not all *that* bad. Jesus even said that his listeners should follow their teachings! Pharisees like Hillel and Shammai lived lives of integrity. Rabbi Akiba said, “The greatest principal in the law is, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’”¹

One of the Pharisees said, “Let thy house be opened wide, and let the poor be members of thy household... a house should have a spacious entrance on the north, south, east, and west, like Job’s, who made four doors to his house. And why did Job make four doors to his house? So that the poor would not be troubled to go all around the house...”² My house does not have four doors on four sides through which the poor can enter. Does yours?

Jesus was aiming his criticism at religious hypocrisy— people who profess one thing, but who do another. He chided the Pharisees for not practicing what they teach. In African-American church circles, we would hear something like, “If you’re going to talk the talk, then you better walk the walk.” Don’t just talk about your faith, show me your faith through your actions. Jesus was aiming his criticism at faith for show.

Jesus spoke out against those who wore phylacteries and fringes. Phylacteries were leather boxes that contained verses of the Bible that the Pharisees wore on their foreheads and on their arms when they prayed. Fringes were tassels that Jewish people wore on the corners of their clothes. Phylacteries and fringes were like the religious jewelry people wear today, like the crosses we dangle about our necks, the fish symbols that we put on the backs of our cars, and the WWJD (What would Jesus do?) bracelets we wear on our wrists. If we display such symbols for show, it’s only talking the talk. If we display such symbols for ourselves, to remind *ourselves* how to act, then perhaps we are trying to walk the talk.

The point is, Jesus does not want symbols or talk. Jesus wants action and Jesus wants integrity. Be honest in things small and great.

In a society where there is so much cynicism about leadership, we must be willing to open our lives up for others’ examination. The walls of our church should be transparent so that the community can see the life and activities of our congregation. Others should be able to observe our actions and see whether or not we are walking our talk!

Your faith developed probably because of a saint you met when you were young. So, remember that you may be listed as a saint by one of Elon Community Church’s children today.

We are called to live lives of integrity, where our actions match our words. We are followers of Jesus Christ. What will others learn about God’s love from our lives?

¹Ronald Allen, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Fall, 1999, p. 14, quoting *Sifra* 89b, cited in *A Rabbinic Anthology*, ed. C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) 172.

²*The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, trans. Judah Goldin. Yale Judaica Series, X (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955) 7:46-47 (Ron Allen, *ibid.* p. 15)