
Saints are Losers

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Sunday after All Saints' Day – Year B**

Today is All Saints Sunday. Someone once said that a saint is like a window. Something you see through. A saint is a window, through whom one might see God. An icon, maybe. Frederick Buechner, the wise preacher, said it this way: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*. 1973. p 83).

What is a saint? There are so many definitions. When you look it up, most definitions say something like, "A saint is someone who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness, likeness, or closeness to God."

This past year has taught me another angle, another definition. Saints are the losers among us. Saints are the people who teach us how to lose. I say this because this has been a season of loss for most of us. A season of loss, personally, and a season of loss for us in the church.

Every one of us has had things that have not gone our way this past year. We have lost things, and people. We have given up things, and we have had things taken away from us.

These losses affect us. They disturb us. They unsettle us, in some cases, so much, that we act more aggressively the next time we encounter someone, or the next time we are arguing our case. Worse, some of us lose control completely. The last two years have been hard, full of loss.

One of the negative consequences of this time, is that we have also lost the ability to lose graciously. We are out of practice. We have lost the habit of knowing how to lose graciously. Many of us then practice our anger and obstinance instead – towards our spouses, our family, our church, our city, our country, our God.

Where are we supposed to go to restore this habit, this habit of losing graciously? Should we even try to restore it? Should we learn, some of us for the first time, how to lose graciously?

Back in September, I answered that question by saying, "Well, we could come to church!" But, today, I answer it another way: "Find a saint." Saints are the people who show us how to lose graciously.

Jesus once said that, "If you want to follow me," he says, "you must deny yourself. Those who want to save their life will lose it." And, that's it. If you want to save your life, you must lose it. That is the heart of the Christian gospel.

We tend to hear these words and think immediately of our one, physical, earthly, life. We all have to die, we think. Maybe the best among us will sacrifice our one physical, earthly, life for the sake of another, maybe as a soldier for the sake of our country.

That would be a noble act, and an honorable calling. But most of us will not be called to such a literal giving up of our lives. Most of us will never have the occasion of throwing ourselves in front of a child to stop a bullet, or of rushing towards twin towers as they are about to fall. We simply will not, most of us, be called to do that.

Instead, most of us are called, are led, to the daily losses. Jesus calls us, most of the time, to the daily giving up of ourselves. Daily, we learn to lose things. Daily, we learn to give way, to give up our desires, for the sake of someone else. The heart of the Christian gospel is that we learn to give up things every day; we give up our

lives every day. Those who lose, daily, are the saints among us.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ does not magically make us happy, or get us good jobs, or make us lots of money, or get us elected as political leaders. Or get us a good boyfriend or girlfriend. Being a follower of Jesus Christ does not even cure of us cancer or get rid of the demons inside us. Sometimes it does. And that is wonderful.

But it is not why Jesus calls us to follow him. Jesus calls us to follow him because he desires for us to discover who we truly are. We are supposed to be giving up things, giving up things, giving up things, not piling on things. In that giving up of our lives, we learn who we truly are; and we learn who God is.

The great saints give up things, and yet they live heartening lives. The great saints have known loss. Finally, of course, a saint is not named a saint until they have known the ultimate loss, until they have died.

Sometimes, sometimes, we glimpse a glory that comes to those who lose. Sometimes, we are blessed to see the glory that follows loss. For instance, have you ever known a sports team, maybe a baseball team, that endured season after season of heartrending loss? And, yet, they endured? Yet, they stayed alive?

Have you ever known a baseball team that seemed never able to win more games than they lost? Like, maybe they couldn't even get above .500? Baseball, after all, is a great exercise in learning how to lose.

Sometimes, we are blessed to see what happens to saints who show us how to lose. They are like baseball teams, caught in loss after loss, time and time again, who nevertheless manage to win their division, and then they win their league pennant, and then, wonder of wonder, they win the world series. They are world champions. Wow.

Well, being a saint is entering the kingdom of heaven after you have known loss after loss after loss. Saints are losers. Saints are losers, first. Next, like all of us, they lose their very lives. And then, then, they win the World Series.

We celebrate saints today, those who have entered the kingdom of heaven. I realize that not every baseball player is a saint. Maybe not every one of us is a saint. But we could be. We could be, if we learn to lose.

Saints are the people who teach us how to lose in life, and then they enter glory. They enter the kingdom of heaven. Being a saint is like winning the world series and processing down the streets of heaven, for hours, in a celebration parade. Those streets are paved with gold, because they are paved with the people of God.

Baseball is only an analogy, of course. On this All Saints Sunday, we acknowledge with gratitude all those people in whom we have glimpsed something of God.

We acknowledge how much they lost in life. We remember that saints are truly human, filled with the confusion of both tears and laughter, both anger and good will, both gentleness and impatience. Saints come in all shapes and sizes, like Halloween costumes and sports uniforms. Saints come with all sorts of beliefs and doctrines, too. Saints are flesh.

But in their losses and foibles, God shows up. God shines through. The traditional definitions are right: saints are the windows, the holy and broken windows, through whom we glimpse the glory of God.

I sing a song today. "I sing a song of saints of God, patient and brave and true. ...The saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too."

AMEN.

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