

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2012 - ALL SAINTS DAY

SERMON: GOD CREATES SAINTS, BY GRACE

THIS IS A SPECIAL DAY ON THE CALENDAR OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR. AND THE CALL TO WORSHIP, THE PRAYER OF CONFESSION, AND THE HYMNS THAT WE SING REFLECT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OCCASSION. THIS IS THE SUNDAY ON WHICH MOST PRESBYTERIANS OBSERVE "ALL SAINTS DAY".

EVERY RELIGIOUS TRADITION AND CULTURE HAS A WAY OF PAYING TRIBUTE TO THOSE WHO HAVE DIED, AND COME TO BE REVERED. THE OFRENDA TABLE HERE AT THE FRONT OF THE SANCTUARY HONORS THE MEMORY OF LOVED ONES IN THE LATIN AMERICAN TRADITION OF ‘LA DIA DE LOS MUERTOS’—THE DAY OF THE DEAD. THIS ONGOING CONNECTION TO OUR LATINO BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHARLOTTE AND AROUND THE WORLD IS A TESTAMENT TO THE MULTICULTURAL NATURE OF OUR CONGREGATION.

“ALL SAINTS DAY” WAS BEING OBSERVED BY THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AS EARLY AS THE FIFTH CENTURY. IT ORIGINALLY COMMEMORATED THOSE WHO HAD BEEN MARTYRED FOR THEIR WITNESS TO CHRIST. AND LATER IT CAME TO INCLUDE THE REMEMBRANCE OF ALL GOD’S FAITHFUL PEOPLE WHO HAVE DIED. BUT “ALL SAINTS DAY” IS MORE THAN JUST A KIND OF CHRISTIAN MEMORIAL DAY. IT IS ALSO A DAY OF TRIUMPHANT JOY IN WHICH WE PROCLAIM THE LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF OUR

SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST...AND GOD'S ONGOING WORK IN THE WORLD THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

NOW, I WAS NOT RAISED AS A PRESBYTERIAN. AND GROWING UP AS A YOUNGSTER IN THE BAPTIST CHURCH, I THOUGHT THAT ONLY ROMAN CATHOLICS HAD SAINTS. IN SUNDAY SCHOOL WE WERE TAUGHT THAT THE PRACTICE OF PRAYING TO SAINTS WAS ONE OF THE REASONS THAT WE PROTESTANTS LEFT THE ROMAN CHURCH BACK IN THE 16TH CENTURY. AS CHILDREN, WE CERTAINLY DIDN'T HAVE ANY PROBLEM WITH ST. NICHOLAS WHO BROUGHT US TOYS AT CHRISTMAS; OR ST. VALENTINE, WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THAT CHOCOLATE WE GOT IN FEBRUARY. THAT NEVER BOTHERED US BAPTIST KIDS.

BUT AT SOME POINT IN MY LIFETIME, THE PROTESTANT CHURCH--INCLUDING THE BAPTIST CHURCH IN MANY PLACES--CHANGED ITS MIND ABOUT SAINTS. AND IN THIS NEW WAY OF OBSERVING "ALL SAINTS DAY", THE TERM "SAINT" IS NOT LIMITED JUST TO THE GREAT HISTORIC FIGURES OF THE CHURCH--THOSE PERSONS WHO HAVE DIED AND COME TO BE REVERED OVER TIME. IN FACT, THE NEW TESTAMENT APPEARS TO USE THE TERM "SAINT" ALMOST SYNONYMOUSLY WITH THE WORD "CHRISTIAN." WHICH WOULD MEAN THAT--IN ONE SENSE--WE ARE ALL, WELL: SAINTS.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT SOME OF THE THINGS THAT I DO ARE NOT VERY SAINT-LIKE. I MEAN, REVEREND CLEGHORN MAY BE A SAINT. AND I'M POSITIVE THAT REVEREND ROGERS IS A SAINT. I'M JUST NOT SO SURE ABOUT YOU AND ME.

IN THIS NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING “ALL SAINTS DAY”, IT COMMEMORATES ALL CHRISTIAN PEOPLE, OF EVERY TIME AND PLACE. IT IS A DAY IN WHICH THE CHURCH REJOICES, GIVING THANKS TO GOD FOR BOTH THE DEATHS AND THE ONGOING LIVES OF THOSE PERSONS WHO, THROUGH THE AGES, FAITHFULLY SERVE THE LORD, BEARING WITNESS TO GOD'S GRACE.

AND THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT WE SHOULD REMEMBER AND CELEBRATE ON THIS DAY IS THAT: GOD CREATES SAINTS--BY GRACE.

HUMANS CAN BE CALLED SAINTS ONLY BECAUSE GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT IS AT WORK IN US. IT IS NOT THAT WE--ON OUR OWN--CAN COME TO SOME GREAT SPIRITUAL ATTAINMENT. IT IS IN SPITE OF OUR HUMAN LIMITATIONS AND FAULTS. IT IS NOT OUR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD THAT MAKES US WORTHY OF THE TITLE: "SAINTS", BUT RATHER GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE AND KINDNESS TOWARD US.

OUR OLD TESTAMENT TEXT TODAY IS ABOUT A PERSON WHO MANY IN THE CHURCH REGARD AS A SAINT BECAUSE OF THE WAY SHE EXHIBITED LOVE AND KINDNESS TOWARD HER MOTHER-IN-LAW. IT'S ONE OF THE BEST-KNOWN STORIES IN THE BIBLE: THE STORY OF RUTH AND NAOMI.

IF YOU GREW UP GOING TO CHURCH LIKE I DID, THIS IS A FAMILIAR STORY, BUT EVERYONE HERE MAY NOT KNOW IT--OR MAY NOT REMEMBER HOW THE STORY BEGINS.

IN ANCIENT ISRAEL, A MAN NAMED ELIMEMECH LIVES IN THE LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM IN ISRAEL, WITH HIS WIFE NAOMI AND THEIR TWO SONS. WHEN A FAMINE STRIKES THE LAND, HE LEAVES ISREAL AND MOVES HIS FAMILY EAST--TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DEAD SEA--SETTLING IN THE LAND OF THE MOABITES. THE MOABITES WERE DISTANT COUSINS OF THE ISRAELITES AND SPOKE A SIMILAR LANGUAGE, BUT THE TWO NATIONS DID NOT PARTICULARLY LIKE ONE ANOTHER, AND THEY CONSIDERED EACH OTHERS' CITIZENS TO BE FOREIGNERS.

THINGS HAPPEN QUICKLY IN THIS FIRST FEW VERSES OF THE STORY. THE TEXT SAYS THAT ELIMELECH DIED IN MOAB, LEAVING NAOMI A WIDOW. HIS TWO SONS THEN MARRIED MOABITE WOMEN--ONE NAMED ORPAH AND THE OTHER NAMED RUTH. BUT JUST TEN YEARS LATER, BOTH SONS OF ELIMELECH AND NAOMI HAD DIED AS WELL--AND NOW THEIR WIVES WERE WIDOWS TOO.

BY NOW, THE STORY SAYS, THE FAMINE IN ISRAEL WAS OVER. AND, WITH ALL OF THE MALE MEMBERS OF HER FAMILY DEAD, NAOMI DECIDES TO RETURN HOME TO BETHLEHEM. SO SHE URGES HER RUTH AND ORPAH, TO GO BACK TO THEIR MOTHERS' HOUSES, AND TRY TO START NEW LIVES.

IN THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST, THE STATUS OF A WOMAN WHOSE HUSBAND HAD DIED WAS PRECARIOUS. A WIDOW HAD NO INHERITANCE RIGHTS TO HER HUSBAND'S PROPERTY. AND, UNLESS HER BIRTH FAMILY OR IN-LAWS TOOK HER IN, SHE WAS SUBJECT TO EXPLOITATION AND HARSH TREATMENT BY SOCIETY.

IN CHAPTER 1, VERSE 8, AS SHE BIDS FAREWELL TO RUTH AND ORPAH, NAOMI GIVES THEM A BLESSING, SAYING: "MAY THE LORD DEAL KINDLY WITH YOU, AS YOU HAVE DEALT WITH THE DEAD AND WITH ME."

LIKE MOST OF WHAT WE READ IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, THIS STORY WAS ORIGINALLY PASSED ON ORALLY--HANDED DOWN FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION--PERHAPS FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS. AND WHEN IT WAS FINALLY WRITTEN DOWN, THE AUTHOR WAS VERY CAREFUL WITH THE WORDS CHOSEN TO TELL THE STORY. IN NAOMI'S BLESSING TO HER DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW, THE WRITER USES THE HEBREW WORD "YAHWEH" FOR "LORD"; AND THE HEBREW WORD "HESED" FOR "KINDLY".

THIS IS NOT ACCIDENTAL SPEECH. HERE THE WRITER OF THE BOOK OF RUTH WANTS TO MAKE SURE WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE GOD OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE IS AT WORK IN WHAT'S HAPPENING TO RUTH AND HER FAMILY.

"YAHWEH" IS THE PERSONAL NAME OF THE GOD OF THE ISRAELITES. AND "HESED" IS A WORD THAT HAS NO REAL EQUIVALENT IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. THE CLOSEST THAT WE CAN COME TO A TRANSLATION IS "STEADFAST LOVE."

"HESED" MEANS DOING MORE THAN IS REQUIRED BY CUSTOM OR LAW. AND IT IS ALSO A WORD THAT IS LOADED WITH THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE. IT IS USED THROUGHOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT TO DESCRIBE GOD'S ACTION IN KEEPING COVENANT WITH HUMANITY. HESED

IS AN ABUNDANT, EVERLASTING FORM OF DIVINE LOVE AND LOYALTY ON THE PART OF A GOD WHO STICKS WITH US.

THIS IS THE GRACE THAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW IN JESUS CHRIST.

THE TEXT SAYS THAT NAOMI IS ABLE TO CONVINCING ORPAH TO STAY IN MOAB AND GO BACK TO HER FAMILY. BUT RUTH CLINGS TO HER MOTHER-IN-LAW, REFUSING TO LEAVE HER. "WHERE YOU GO, I WILL GO," RUTH SAYS. "YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE, AND YOUR GOD MY GOD." IN MAKING THIS DECISION TO REMAIN FAITHFUL TO NAOMI, EMIGRATE TO ISRAEL, AND ACCEPT THE GOD OF ISRAEL AS LORD, RUTH JOINS THE COMPANY OF THE SAINTS.

BUT AS THE WRITER MAKES CLEAR WITH HIS PRECISE USE OF LANGUAGE, THIS IS NOT PRIMARILY A STORY ABOUT RUTH'S FAITHFULNESS TO NAOMI, BUT RATHER A STORY OF GOD'S LOVINGKINDNESS TOWARD RUTH. IT IS NOT RUTH'S EXEMPLARY BEHAVIOR, BUT GOD'S GRACE THAT IS THE POINT OF THE STORY. YOU SEE, GOD CREATES SAINTS, BY GRACE.

THE STORY OF WHAT HAPPENS TO RUTH AND NAOMI WHEN THEY GET TO BETHLEHEM CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER FOUR CHAPTERS. RUTH MEETS AND MARRIES A MAN NAMED BOAZ, WHO IS A RELATIVE OF NAOMI. RUTH AND BOAZ HAVE A SON NAMED OBED, AND A GRANDSON NAMED JESSE. AND JESSE IS THE FATHER OF DAVID, WHO WOULD ONE DAY BE CONSIDERED THE GREATEST KING OF ANCIENT ISRAEL.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE GOSPELS OF MATTHEW AND LUKE PLACE RUTH AND BOAZ IN THE GENEALOGY OF JOSEPH, THE HUSBAND OF MARY, THE MOTHER OF JESUS—THE MESSIAH—THE CHRIST.

MODERN RABBINIC JUDAISM CELEBRATES RUTH THE MOABITE AS THE MODEL CONVERT TO THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL. THE LUTHERAN CHURCH LISTS RUTH IN THEIR CALENDAR OF SAINTS. AND SOMETIMES PRESBYTERIANS READ HER STORY ON ALL SAINTS DAY.

SO WHO ARE THE PERSONS IN YOUR LIFE THAT, BY THEIR WITNESS, HAVE ENCOURAGED YOU IN THE FAITH?

AT OUR CENTENNIAL WORSHIP SERVICE ON SUNDAY, OCTOBER 14TH, PASTOR CLEGHORN READ ALOUD THE NAMES OF CALDWELL PRESBYTERIAN MEMBERS WHO STUCK WITH THIS CHURCH DURING ITS YEARS OF DECLINE AND CHANGE; EMBRACED THE NEW THING THAT GOD IS DOING HERE; AND HAVE SINCE DIED AND GONE ON TO THE KINGDOM.

WHO IN THIS CHURCH—OR IN YOUR FAMILY OR WORKPLACE--HAS BEEN A SAINT FOR YOU?

FOR ME, DARWIN BLAINE IS ONE SUCH WITNESS. SOME OF YOU WORSHIPING HERE THIS MORNING PROBABLY KNEW DARWIN. HE WAS A VOLUNTEER WITH URBAN MINISTRIES, WITH FRIENDSHIP TRAYS, AND NUMEROUS OTHER COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS IN CHARLOTTE. A NATIVE OF BROOKLYN, NEW YORK, DARWIN WAS A MARINE AND A VETERAN OF WORLD WAR II. HE WORKED IN THE PRINTING INDUSTRY FOR MUCH OF HIS LIFE. I KNEW HIM AS A MEMBER OF MYERS PARK PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH WHERE, ALONG WITH HIS WIFE NANCY, HE WAS ONE OF OUR MOST ACTIVE AND VISIBLE MEMBERS. HE SERVED AS A DEACON AND AN ELDER, AND HE TAUGHT SUNDAY SCHOOL. I WAS ON A NUMBER OF CHURCH COMMITTEES WITH DARWIN OVER THE YEARS. AND SOMETIMES HE AND I WOULD BE THE ONLY TWO PEOPLE WHO SHOWED UP FOR SOME OF THOSE COMMITTEE MEETINGS. OUR SENIOR PASTOR, STEVE EASON, SAYS THAT HE RAN INTO DARWIN ONE DAY AND ASKED HIM: "DARWIN, TELL ME AGAIN NOW. HOW MANY OTHER DISCIPLES WERE THERE WITH YOU ON THAT MOUNTAINTOP IN GALILEE WHEN Y'ALL SAW JESUS ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN?" HE WAS SUCH A CONSISTENT WITNESS, THAT WE ASSUMED HE WOULD ALWAYS BE WITH US. BUT DARWIN DEPARTED THIS LIFE LAST JUNE, AT THE AGE OF 85. AND FOR ME, HE IS A SAINT.

"ALL SAINTS DAY" IS A TIME WHEN WE CAN REFLECT ON, AND GIVE THANKS FOR, THOSE PERSONS WHO HAVE BEEN INFLUENTIAL IN OUR SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND GROWTH.

THEIR STORIES POINT US TO GOD'S GLORY. AND IN THE PROCESS, WE ARE REMINDED OF THE INFLUENCE THAT OUR LIVES CAN HAVE UPON OTHERS, WHEN WE OPEN OURSELVES MORE FULLY TO THE HOLY SPIRIT."

YOU MAY NOT THINK THAT YOU ARE DOING GREAT THINGS FOR CHRIST. AND YET, YOU MAY BE SERVING THE PURPOSES OF GOD IN WAYS RECOGNIZED BY OTHERS. YOU MAY INDEED BE NUMBERED AMONG THE SAINTS TODAY AS WE GIVE THANKS TO GOD FOR ALL PEOPLE OF EVERY TIME AND PLACE WHOSE WITNESS IS PART OF GOD'S ONGOING STORY--LIKE

THE STORY OF RUTH. HUMANS CAN BE CALLED SAINTS BECAUSE OF GOD'S STEADFAST LOVE FOR US IN JESUS CHRIST.

SO REMEMBER AND CELEBRATE ON THIS DAY THE GOOD NEWS:

THAT GOD CREATES SAINTS...BY GRACE.

LET US PRAY: NUMBER US AMONG YOUR SAINTS, O GOD, AND JOIN US WITH THE FAITHFUL OF EVERY AGE. THAT, STRENGTHENED BY THEIR WITNESS AND IN THE POWER OF YOUR HOLY SPIRIT, WE MIGHT RUN WITH PERSEVERENCE THE RACE THAT IS SET BEFORE US. IN JESUS NAME WE PRAY. AMEN.