

All Saints' Sunday, 2007

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. Ephesians 1: 15

Do to others as you would have them do to you. Luke 6:31

Last Monday night I attended an event sponsored by Mass Equality: a panel discussion about how to approach the problem of the African American community's hostility, or perceived hostility, to marriage equality and, more generally, to gay men and lesbians. A good deal of the discussion among the four Black panelists focused on the opposition by the Black churches to LGBT equality, and to their condemnation of homosexuality.

My contribution to the discussion after the panel presentation was to observe that the Marriage Movement and LGBT groups generally view not only Black churches but white churches as hostile, with some reason. And further, that the instinct of LGBT activists is to view even progressive religious folks as the enemy, because so many have been so hurt by religion and religious people. I said that I thought we needed to pursue a deeper level of inquiry and understanding among allies and the opposition alike, and to try to connect on a more profound human level, not simply a strategic one.

The next development was quite dramatic to me. An Hispanic gentleman who has been very active in the movement went to the microphone and said, "I want to know how I can be sure I'm not going to hell for being gay." I felt as if there could hardly have been a more immediate response to my desire for more personal discourse.

Now, his agony about this question was authentic and individual, I have no doubt. But his point was also rhetorical and pointed to what so many Christians – of all colors and cultures and tongues and sexual orientations– wrestle with. What is preached to, what is inflicted upon, if I may say so, so many who try to follow Jesus. And what so many people torture themselves with as a result.

One of the women on the panel responded that she, too, worried about going to hell. She worried about it because she smoked, because of her many other transgressions, as well as because of what she called her "gaiety."

I was tempted to get back up and retort, *You are not going to hell! None of you are going to hell. Or at least certainly not because you are gay.* I was tempted to preach to that little crowd what I said in my sermon two weeks ago:

God and Jesus have no interest in individual salvation. Indeed, they don't even have the concept. God and Jesus have their eye on the community: community faith, community practice, community covenant. That's one of the reasons Jesus takes so lightly the charge that he is hanging around with sinners. His concern is really not on what the sinner has done, but how the community treats its members.

Because, by those standards, it's those who make up communities that discriminate against or shun or condemn others— it's that crowd that's going to go to hell, not individuals who are trying to live faithful lives in the face of exclusion, judgment, and even outright hatred.

However, I was not at that meeting to deliver sermons, I was there to listen and to learn. But afterwards I talked a bit with Gary Daffen, who had been on the panel. “Lots of preachers make their money telling people they're going to go to hell,” he observed. “Yes,” I said. “And the Roman Church made it a business for centuries, too. That's why we had the Reformation!”

Now I don't want to pretend that the Reformation cured all the ills of Christian theology and practice, or that Reformation preachers were strangers to the hellfire and brimstone approach to conversion. But if we go back to the Gospels, I really believe what I said two weeks ago, that individual sin and individual salvation are not the focus of the Gospel message. And today's readings, meant to focus our minds and hearts on saints and sainthood, point to what that focus is.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers, says the Letter to the Ephesians. The author here— Paul or a Pauline follower—is applauding the *faith* of the congregation at Ephesus. He's giving thanks that they believe in the Good News of Christ. And when he commends their love toward all the saints he's talking not about some rarified group of spiritually spotless people, but about their love for others who are followers of Jesus. That's who the saints are, simply enough, the saints are others who follow Jesus. The saints, my dear friends, are us.

But of course following Jesus means something, and demands something. And for a summary of that meaning and those demands we can look to today's Gospel, which consists of the Blessings and the Woes. *Blessed are you who are hungry now, who weep, who are hated and reviled and excluded. And woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing.* Again, I could have quoted all this to the little band on Monday night so

worried about going to hell. According to Jesus, they are all on the right side of the bright line here, I suspect.

But the crux of Jesus' teaching here, and the true meaning and demand of being a follower of his, is the punchline. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* This is the great call and challenge of the Gospel, the great call and challenge of faith, the great call and challenge of living in community. It is the call to give up worrying about our personal individual purity and destiny, and to plunge ourselves into the ambiguous, often messy, always sacrificial business of loving one another, and that means *treating* one another, as we ourselves would wish to be loved and treated.

That, my dear friends, is the road to sainthood. *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* It's the road that, if we could only all follow it, would heal the world. But as Jesus is continually pointing out, the road begins with each of us here, now, in our own hearts, and in our own community of faith, our own communion of saints

Alleluia! Amen