

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' John 11: 32

How many of you believe you know a saint – a living saint? And if you think so, what qualities do you associate with that person? Think about it for a minute.

I pondered this question the other day when I was walking and thinking about All Saints' Day, which is one of my very favorite feast days – perhaps my very favorite. I know that I have said, often enough, in a more or less off-hand way, about someone, *she's a saint*. Or *he's a saint*. But during my walk the other day I couldn't remember who a single one of those people was (or is). Eventually, one friend came to mind who I do firmly believe is a living saint, and his name will come up later.

A couple of possibilities. One is that I've gotten to know these people better, and their apparently saintly qualities have become tarnished with exposure. Or, more probably, I was impressed in passing with an outstanding quality in someone who is no longer in my sights, in my awareness. And I suspect that when I rather casually labeled someone as a saint, I was commenting on a capacity for patience or serenity that seemed extraordinary.

And contemplating that gave me pause, because that instinctive reaction runs contrary to most of what I know about the lives of the saints, and what I believe about discipleship.

All Saints' Day is the time for us to commemorate, with special devotion, all those who have gone before us into the all-embracing arms of God. I love this day because of its gift of consolation – that is, those whom I have loved and admired and who have died, have joined the Communion of Saints. Whatever their human faults and failings may have been, they are all now saints of God. And All Saints' Day offers also the gift of inspiration – as the lovely hymn Grand Isle proclaims, *They were all of them saints of God /and I mean, God helping to be one too*.

Do you see what I'm getting at? The folks I have loved and lost from this world, and whom I remember particularly on this day, I did not think of as saints during their lifetimes. I may have loved, cherished, even adored some of them, but I did not think of them as saints, or, at least, as saintly. I didn't value them, necessarily, for an uncommon capacity for patience or peacemaking or those qualities that have caused me to label some

acquaintance, briefly and perhaps capriciously, as *a saint*. The saints of God, to quote Grand Isle again, are *just folk like me, and I mean to be one too*.

Now, some of you may have noticed that the attributes I mentioned in my associations with living sainthood are not attributes that I conspicuously possess. Patience? Serenity? Maybe not so much. Maybe more than when I was younger. And perhaps I have done a small piece of peace making, but it's of the *no peace without justice* variety, not the *still small voice* kind of peace. So, I'm reflexively thinking of saints as people opposite to me, and that's not good for my self-esteem, and it's not good theology. But I dare say I'm not unique in this habit of mind.

And that's too bad. Because it's not helpful to any of us to think of sainthood as comprised of qualities we *don't* possess and may not be able to acquire. In this regard, I love to think about Mary and Martha.

Many of you know that I have a diocesan role as Chaplain to the postulants and candidates in the ordination process. In September I led a meditation day for the class of postulants to the vocational diaconate. We worked with bible passages, and I gave them, among others, two stories about Mary and Martha of Bethany. The first was the story we are all familiar with about Jesus coming to visit their home, Martha bustling about doing housework and cooking while Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching. Jesus reproaches Martha and says that Mary has *taken the better part*. That is, Mary has partaken of Jesus' wisdom while Martha was taking care of business.

And then there's this passage, today's Gospel, about the resurrection of Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus. What we don't hear comes a few verses before our Gospel selection. What we don't hear is *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.'*

So in this story, Mary, characteristically, stays home. She waits for Jesus to arrive and then kneels at Jesus' feet and says she knows that if he had come sooner, Lazarus would not have died. But how did he get there at all? Martha went and fetched him! Moreover, she confesses that she knows God will give Jesus whatever he asks, that is, she knows Jesus is the Messiah. So here, Martha the *doer*, the activist, gets Jesus to where he needs to be, and gets the job done, gets her brother raised from the dead. And confesses her radical faith into the bargain.

When I asked the deacons in training, in their retreat, to meditate upon and then talk about these two stories, *they were all amazed*. Because they had all heard preached, again and again, that Mary *has taken the better part*, or, as my friend Mark Hollingsworth, now bishop of Ohio, is fond of saying, we are human *beings*, not human *doings*.

And it is true that we are meant to believe that we are saved by faith and not by works. But, truly, some of us are, God love us, human *doings*. God made us to be activists. God calls us into activism. And if God made us a certain way, and seems to be calling us, authentically, to a life composed of more action than contemplation, does that make us second class Christians, with no hope of achieving sainthood? I hope not. I think that would be a waste of human difference.

One of the deacons-to-be said, *of course, our ultimate goal has to be to sit and listen to Our Lord*.

Who says? I replied. *What if our ultimate goal is not simply to listen to Our Lord but then to get up and go out and do something about what Our Lord says? Go out and free the captives and give sight to the blind? Go out and seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly (not sit humbly, but walk) with our God?*

Well, I expect you take my point. And when I think of people whom I would really, seriously, designate as candidates for sainthood, people who have been alive in my lifetime, I think of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and my friend Gene Robinson. (all men, true, but we have to let some guys in here with Mary and Martha) These men all are, or were, practitioners of non-violence, but that does not mean that any of them are, or were, stay-at-home, sit -at -the -feet- of -Our Lord kind of guys. Activists, change agents like Martha, one and all.

And certainly those of us whose tendency is toward human doing are *standing*, always, *in the need of prayer*. Our works are undergirded and supported and sustained by those whose vocation focuses on contemplation and prayer. God needs us all, I assume, that's why God has made us so marvelously diverse.

In the pantheon of saints, Martha is the patron of housewives. That's a bit depressing. But she is also the patron of the physically disabled, beggars, blacksmiths, the woods, and Edinburgh, and is invoked against epilepsy, cancer, insanity, sterility in women, and the terrors of the night. A busy lady. I'd like to claim her as patron saint of activists.

And we have two Saint Marys: the blessed Virgin, of course, and then Mary of Bethany who is conflated with Mary Magdalene. This Mary is the patron of repentant prostitutes. Well, I ask you? Which would you rather be? In fairness, though, Mary is also the patron of the contemplative life and penitent sinners – not a bad assignment either, and probably not relaxing, given all the repentant sinners around.

The truth is, I believe, that we are all saints and all sinners, all of us, all of God's children. Nothing in this broken world is entirely clear-cut – the giants of world change I just listed all had, and have, their very human faults and failings. And Mary and Martha, those exemplars, had the defects of their virtues – Martha short on patience, Mary a bit on the passive side. And so the *world is bright with joyous saints who love to do Jesus will*, and who are, at the same time, *standing in the need of prayer*. Even those who have gone on to greater glory in the arms of God continue to receive our prayers, and we pray for them today and always, in awe and in gratitude for their faithful witness.

Alleluia! Amen.