

A sermon delivered by  
The Rev. David W. Fleenor, M.Div., S.T.M.  
“*The Scandalous Lives of the Saints*”

The Church of the Transfiguration  
1 East 29<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY  
Sunday, November 5, 2006  
The Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost  
All Saints’ Day 1

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14  
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17  
Matthew 5:1-12  
Psalm 149

Access the readings by clicking on this link:

<http://www.io.com/%7Ekellywp/YearABC/HolyDays/SaintsI.html>

---

## INTRODUCTION

Scandalous! Have you noticed how American culture loves a good scandal? They are all over the news. Recently, there’s been one involving a congressional page, a corporate spy, and the president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Today is All Saints’ Day. Year after year we hear sermons about the virtues of all the saints, but this year I thought I would take a different approach. What about the vices of the saints? What about the scandals in the lives of the saints? Wouldn’t it be interesting to know about some of those?

I think so. But not just for the sake of interest. Knowing about the vices of the saints helps to prove an important point: **a saint is not a perfect human being; a saint is a holy human being.** And the two – perfect and holy – are very different.

### I. WHAT DOES “SAINT” MEAN?

- The word “saint” literally means “a holy one.”
- In the New Testament the term is applied to all faithful Christians.<sup>1</sup>
- Later it came to be applied to elite Christian, such as martyrs and heroes of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Don S. Armentrout and Robert B. Slocum, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church Publishing, 2000), 454.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

- And it wasn't until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that saints began to be canonized by the Pope. When this occurred saints began to be seen as protectors and intercessors rather than witness to Christ.<sup>3</sup>

I prefer the more literal and early definition of a saint as a holy one. Understood in this way, the saints are not just the heroes of the Church, but all Christians, living and dead. That means that you and I are part of All the Saints because we too are holy ones.

## II. WHAT IS HOLINESS?

So this day is not just about those saints that have gone before us such as St. Paul, St. Augustine, or St. Francis of Assisi; it is also about the saints that are gathered here with us. All of us are saints, not because we are perfect, but because we are holy.

### A. Corporate Holiness

1. The creed says that we are one *holy* catholic and apostolic church.
2. The Church is holy because the Holy Spirit dwells within it, consecrating its members – you and me – and guiding us to do the work of God.

### B. Personal Holiness

1. On a more personal level, we are all made holy at baptism when the Spirit indwells us and gives us new life.
2. This begins our journey into holiness and wholeness.
3. This journey is called sanctification.

### C. Sanctification

1. Interestingly, sanctification is in a category theologian's call "already and not yet."
  - a. We are already made holy at baptism, and are therefore holy ones or saints.
  - b. And we will continue to be made holy all our lives. Therefore, we are already holy and not yet fully holy.
  - c. One theologian put it this way, "...sanctification is both a gift and a goal, and there is not simply progress **toward** sanctification but rather progress **in** sanctification."<sup>4</sup>
  - d. So being made holy is part of the journey of our lives.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Owen C. Thomas and Ellen K. Wondra, *Introduction to Theology* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2002), 220.

## 2. What does holiness look like?

- a. Jesus is the only fully sanctified person in history, so by looking at him we can begin to see what holiness and sanctification look like.
  - i. Jesus was fully present with each person that he encountered. Think of the woman at the well, blind Bartemaeus, the rich young ruler. Christ met them where they were and in that moment they were all that matter to him. His full focus was upon them.
  - ii. Jesus was filled with love and acted on it. John Wesley defined sanctification as, “pure love reigning in the heart and life.”<sup>5</sup> Christ, as we know, is the very embodiment of love.
  - iii. He was united to God in such a way that his will was knit together with that of the Father’s.
- b. This is what holiness looks like. Jesus is the prime example. But that can be a little intimidating. That is why we have days to commemorate the lives of the saints. Their lives and actions seem a little more repeatable – a little easier to imitate – than that of the Holy Son of God. That is why I think it is important to make the distinction between perfect and holy. It is also why I think it we should look at the vices of the saints as well as their virtues.

### III. THE SCANDALS OF THE SAINTS

#### A. Old Testament

1. Consider **Moses** who murdered an Egyptian man and then buried him in the sand in order to cover up his sin<sup>6</sup>.
2. **King David** who, upon seeing a beautiful woman bathing, sent for her and ended up committing adultery with her. On top of that, he conspired to have the woman’s husband killed in battle to cover up his sin<sup>7</sup>.

This is scandalous! Imagine if this was picked up by Fox News.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 2:12

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 11:2-27

## B. New Testament

1. There is **St. Peter** who, when confronted about his association with Jesus, denied Christ three times.<sup>8</sup>
2. **St. Paul**, of course, is well known for torturing and murdering Christians before he himself converted.<sup>9</sup>
3. **St. Mary Magdalene** is believed to have been an adulterer or prostitute (although both assertions are debatable).

## C. Early Church

1. **St. Augustine** (4<sup>th</sup> c.) had a sketchy past. He stole, not because of neediness, but for the pleasure of stealing. He himself said, “It was all done for a giggle...”<sup>10</sup> Also, he, like Jimmy Carter many centuries later, had “lust in his heart.” Unlike Jimmy Carter, however, St. Augustine indulged himself many times over. We now know him for his great contributions to theology and his able leadership during the life of the Early Church.

## D. Medieval Era

1. **St. Francis of Assisi** (13<sup>th</sup> c.) was a bit of a playboy and had a wild youth. It is written of him that, “No one loved pleasure more than Francis; he had a ready wit, sang merrily, delighted in fine clothes and showy display. Handsome... [among other things]...he soon became the prime favourite among the young nobles of Assisi, the foremost in every feat of arms, the leader of the civil revels, the very king of frolic.”<sup>11</sup> He is now known for simplicity of life, kindness to the poor, and his love and care for animals. Every year there are commemorations of St. Francis with the blessing of the animals.
2. **Ignatius of Loyola** (15<sup>th</sup> c.), from whom we get the Society for Jesus, or the Jesuits, described himself “as a man given to the follies of the world, and what he enjoyed most was warlike sport, with a great and foolish desire to win fame.”<sup>12</sup> It is also said about Ignatius that “...he was particularly careless about gambling, affairs with women, and the use of arms.”<sup>13</sup> Ignatius

---

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18

<sup>9</sup> Acts 22:1-6

<sup>10</sup> Henry Chadwick, trans. *Saint Augustine Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06221a.htm>

<sup>12</sup> George E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 15, 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

was a worldly man with a big ego who loved to fight and wanted nothing more than fame and fortune. Today, Jesuit priests and brothers are engaged in ministries all over the world. Their work focuses on education, missionary work, and human rights and social justice. In fact, Fordham University is a Jesuit university.

#### IV. THE SCANDAL OF THE GOSPEL

These are just some of the scandalous lives of the saints. They were people, like you and me, which had good days and bad days. And it wasn't that the good ones outnumbered the bad ones.

##### A. The Holy Spirit

It was that the grace and love of God filled their lives in ways that brought about holiness. A holy life comes about because God first loves us and we respond to that love by cooperating with the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit fill and indwells us.

1. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us is closer and more unitive than any other that we will ever experience. In other words, the Holy Spirit is closer to us than a baby is to a mother while it is in the womb. We are joined to God even more closely than we are joined to ourselves. Hence, the Holy Spirit knows us better than we know ourselves.
  - a. Consider the Collect for Purity that we say at the beginning of every worship service: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid..."<sup>14</sup>
2. **This is the scandal of the Gospel: that God knows us better than we know ourselves, which means God knows all of our scandals and vices, and God still loves us.**
  - a. How could this be? It is only because of the grace of God. It is not just, it is not fair. It is simply the grace of God. That is what makes our lives and the lives of all the saints before us holy. The grace and love of God. They and we are not perfect and never will be. But we are holy.
  - b. Are you able to do that for yourself and your neighbor? Are you able to know about one's vices or scandals and still love that person? That is, in part, what being a saint – a holy one – is about because that is what Jesus did and continues to do today.

---

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 323, 355.

- c. That is our task. That is what we are called to do on this All Saints' Sunday.

## V. STEWARDSHIP

And there is one more thing: we are in our second week of our Stewardship campaign.

### A. What Stewardship Is and Is Not

1. Stewardship is a grateful response to the love and grace of God that is expressed with our money.
2. Stewardship is not fundraising, so I won't stand here and tell you about the church's financial needs. That is a whole other issue that should not be confused with stewardship.
3. Stewardship is about responding to God's love in a tangible and disciplined way.

### B. How Does This Connect to All Saint's Day?

1. We are the beneficiaries, not only of God's love and financial blessing, but also of the love and stewardship of those saints from Transfiguration over the past 180 years that have gone before us.
2. The saints of Transfiguration chose to participate in God's work to build this church. And today it is a beautiful place that touches the lives of all who walk through the doors.
3. I invite you to consider how you would like to give thanks to God this year. Could it be through contributing a portion of your income to the Church of the Transfiguration? To do so means that you will be participating in one way with God as God continues to build God's kingdom through this church.