

Sermon: November 7, 2021

“Saint Bob”

Scripture: Acts 4:32-37, Ephesians 1:11-23, Matthew 28:16-20

The thing about being a sick kid is that you end up missing a lot of school. In tenth grade, I missed 4 months of school. At the time, we didn't know what the problem was. I was sick and missing 4 weeks of school would have been bad enough, but 4 months was devastating for an A student, so my parents brought in a retired teacher to tutor me. That tutor's name was Bob, and he worked with me on English and Social Studies, maybe a little bit of science. Bob was a kind man who was exceedingly patient. I wasn't a difficult student, but I was sick, and I was a teenager, so, I mean, you do the math.

At the time, my family was attending a community church and were heavily involved for the time we attended. This church was on the very conservative side of the spectrum, really driving home this idea that we must all believe the same way and the “right way” in order to get to heaven. I learned along the way that Bob was Baha'i – a religion that sees value in all religious traditions and the unity and equality of all people, which it hopes will lead to a final peace. People of the Baha'i tradition see a thread in religious traditions that progresses more from age to age and achieves finality in some ultimate truth, some revelation of the divine, which perhaps no one really understands. They see God as transcendent in a way that makes God difficult to know directly – essentially, an infinite truth unknowable to the finite minds of humanity. The thing is, although Bob was not a Christian, his openness and care showed me glimpses of what it means to be a person who sees the inherent worth of all individuals.

Despite his differing spiritual perspective or maybe because of it, we talked often talked about God. He liked hearing my perspective on faith and, I think, could tell that I had a plethora of questions. The thing about Bob that I didn't find at church is that he let me honestly express those questions. He gave me the space to ask them and was nonjudgmental in his response.

My interest in the diversity of the world's religions coincided with my time being tutored by Bob. His work for justice for the indigenous peoples of the United States whose land, way of life, and lives themselves were stolen from them was a lesson to me early on about the vital importance of what Howard Thurman calls the "inherent dignity and worthfulness of" the people many of us choose to forget about. As we studied books like *Great Expectations*, Bob would lift up incredibly important points about social outcasts and poverty. He would offer up stories relating to what we discussed that helped emphasize moral lessons that pointed to the very things I was learning in a Christian church.

You might wonder why on earth your wild pastor is talking about someone who is not Christian on a day when we honor, remember, and celebrate others, living or dead, who are part of our faith. Well, I'm going to tell you: Bob may not have been a Christian, but Bob understood the Christian message and connected with people different from him, recognizing in all people a connectedness and divine spark. Because of his religion and the type of individual he was, Bob recognized a unity in people of belief that was missing from much of my church education. More than that, Bob was interested in people, in understanding them better, not just religiously or culturally, but also in those things that made them unique. He didn't

denigrate, and his questions, more than anything, were seeking questions designed to draw out deeper insight.

What's funny in our society is how often we lament the lack of values, the loss of our morals; we miss "the way it used to be." Yet, we forget that the way it used to be was a life much more communal than our current individualistic focus on personal liberty acknowledges. Sister Joan Chittister writes in her book about this section of the Creed, the one that talks about "the communion of Saints," as one that points to "the unity of strangers that forms around the image of the Christ who calls us always beyond our past into a demanding and sometimes lonely present" (*In Search of Belief*, 178).

We are called to move into the future of our faith in communion with those who have gone before us in the faith. And beyond that those who go with us now in the faith. We take the Eucharist 14 or more times a year, in communion with Christ and with one another. The Eucharist really ties us together as a human race and, in the words of Sister Joan, "requires our responsibility for its well-being." When we act with no regard for others because we want only to take responsibility for ourselves, we ignore the very communal call of our lives and our faith. The one that calls us back to Jesus's words in the great commission, as we read today, which tells us to make disciples of all nations. He tells the disciples to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." And what did Jesus' command above all? What did Jesus, himself, say were the two greatest commandments? Was it about avoiding hell? Don't think so. Was it about believing in a heavenly reward at the end of our lives? Nope. Was it about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps? Of course not. The most important commandments, according to Jesus, himself, involved love. Firstly, the love

of God. Whole-bodied, full-hearted love of God. Secondly, the love of neighbor as the self. So, if you believe you should take care of yourself, my friends, then, if you are a Christian, you must also believe in caring for your neighbor. No exceptions. No getting around it.

The Creed does not call us to believe in the church. This section really begins with “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints...” the holy universal church (that’s what catholic means—it’s not speaking of the Roman Catholic Church) and the communion of saints are the living embodiment of the Holy Spirit moving and working among and within us, propelling us to act as the body of Christ in the world. And these two things, “the church and the communion of saints” are about community. The Greek word for church used more than 80 times in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which, as Adam Hamilton points out in his book *Creed*, “Literally means *called out*, as in a gathering of people called together” (110). When Jesus talks about his church, he means those assembled who belong to him *and, at the same time*, who follow his commands. Not just those who “experience fellowship with him but [who] do his will and his work in the world” (111). The church isn’t the building, the church is the people, the community gathered and united in Christ, working together toward the mission not of bending people to our will, but of teaching them to obey the commands that Christ lifted up above all others. Love God and love others.

Why am I talking about someone who’s not Christian when I talk about those of us gathered and working together as Christians? Because Bob’s work in teaching youth and working with indigenous people helped him to live out the values, we spend our lives of faith learning about and living into:

love of God (whom Bob most definitely loved) and love of others. Bob understood the unity in that love and worked every day toward a deeper relationship with God and more loving actions with others.

In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul remarks on how God, through Christ, brings all who believe into unity across time and in his own time. In his time, Paul sought to bridge the greatest divide among the people of God: Jews and Gentiles. He encouraged them to see what he saw: the church as a living manifestation of unity in God. It did not matter whether you were originally a Jew or not.

The saints are typically thought of as those who have lived lives of faith that allow them to be recognized officially by the Roman Catholic Church, from which *all* Christians have a historical connection. Protestants like to put down the Catholic Church for its abuses and faults, and that's fair, but we must also recognize that their rich history is also a part of ours. Luther needed something to rebel against when he nailed those treatises to the door after all. But the saints are not just official canonized saints. They are also those people of faith who have gone before us and who live life beside us. The saints are people committed to God and are faithful, dedicated to the service to God and neighbor.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we have a relationship, that we are part of something greater than ourselves, that relationship transcends both time and space through Christ. Jesus's missional call to the disciples on that mountaintop was about relationship—with God and with one another. A call not just to Jews who were already following him, but to those beyond that time and space that would go on to. We are but a small part of the much bigger picture. Perhaps this can be a comfort to us

on those days when the woes of the world feel too immense to be handled by us alone. We are not isolated; we have partners and a broader community.

But even as we remember this, let us not forget our rootedness and connectedness in Christ. I wear this necklace with a tree on it. The tree with roots that extend into the ground is a reminder to me of the connectedness of all things across all lines of division. Our scriptures today in part remind us that we are called to recognize our connectivity, whether we like it or not, with those who came before us and those who run this race with us. The early church was committed, as we should be, to overcoming those things which divide, to be a people who overcome barriers.

When I graduated from High School, Bob came to my graduation party and delivered to me a copy of a book called, *The Prophet*, by a Lebanese-American writer, Khalil Gibran, with the following passage: "...if you would know God, be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children. And look into space; you shall see Him walking in the clouds, outstretching His arms in the lightning and descending in rain. You shall see Him smiling in flowers then rising and waving His hands in the trees." Bob may not have been a Christian, and so perhaps by Paul's definition he would not be a saint, but Bob was a remarkable teacher and man of God, Christian or not. C.S. Lewis said the following, "There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it." If there have been saints walking among us, surely Bob is one.

On this All-Saints Sunday, we gather as a church in person and on Facebook, across time and space, to take communion together. We will do this in mere moments. As we do, let us remember the saints of our lives, living or dead, who have exemplified lives lived in faithful commitment to God *and* to one another.

For your saints, O God, we are thankful. **Amen.**