

Second Verse, Same as the First....

[Text - Matthew 5:1-12]

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I don't remember their first names; I don't think I ever knew them. To me, they were simply the Reece sisters - Miss Reece the Sunday School teacher and Miss Reece the Sunday School Superintendent. They were both pretty old [which of course is a relative term, that keeps changing the older *I* get]. Yet in spite of their advanced years, these two sisters had tremendous energy and enthusiasm, which they shared each week with us young children at Zion Lutheran Church in Canton, Ohio. With one of them playing the piano and the other leading the singing, we would all sing-out loudly and boldly, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And even though I was only five or six years old, and knew very little about *The Bible*, I could sing with confidence and conviction. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible [*and* Miss Reece] tells me so!" I knew that the Bible was a special book, that told us about God and Jesus; but more importantly, I knew that the Reece sisters were two special people, who treated me and every child there as being loved by them, by Jesus, and by God.

In the fifty-five years that have passed since those early Sunday School days, I've learned a lot more about Jesus and the Bible, about God and theology, about myself and about Life in general. Yet still, while searching for a foundation for today's sermon about the Saints of God and the Faith of the Church, I kept returning to those early childhood memories. Now I realize, that for an All Saints Sunday sermon, you'd expect a seminary-educated preacher-man to come up with something more profound than "Jesus Loves Me". But then again, maybe not. Maybe that early experience of Church and Faith, given to me by those two kind and "saintly" old Sunday School teachers, gets closer to the heart of what it means to be a "Saint" than anything I ever read in seminary. Maybe when trying to express the Church's most profound theological concepts, it's sometimes helpful to curtail the big words, and to concentrate on the small, yet powerful *actions*.

Throughout the Scriptures, genuine *faith* invites and inspires people to *act* - to do something remarkable, in response to a prior, Divine action. And those who respond, are called *saints* - a term much broader than the super-sacred icons that the Church sometimes venerates. In its primary definition, a saint can be *anyone* who experiences or recognizes something Divine; and “faith” is that person’s response to that Divine experience. I never knew what the Reece sisters’ experience of the Divine was, yet I and countless others were definitely blessed by the positive *actions* of their faithful response. And whether we are talking about Faith or God, Saints or Sacraments or Stewardship, it’s extremely beneficial when you and I can link those words to a meaningful memory or a specific action, that helps bring those concepts to life.

For example, when I think about “faith” as it’s experienced and lived-out among this community, it’s quite clear to me that faith is much more about action than it is about words. When we prepare and serve our Hunger Meals, we rarely talk about Grace with those families we serve. We do have a table “grace” before we eat, and we’re certainly open to any conversations about Church or spirituality that our guests might initiate. But our purpose isn’t to talk about the compassionate welcome of Jesus Christ; it’s to graciously extend that welcome to those sisters and brothers who need our support. When you and I give to Our Church’s Wider Mission, we help make a positive difference in other people’s lives. Yet it doesn’t matter whether those people are atheists or Anglicans, whether they’re from Cleveland or the Congo, whether they’re extremely pious or exceptionally profane - you and I respond to their needs, in grateful response to what God has given us.

In the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, God gives us a marvelous example of how to live freely and fully for the sake of others. Jesus’ undying faith in Divine Love and Grace moves and empowers him to feed the hungry, heal the sick, free the oppressed and welcome the outcast. Jesus’ deep trust in Divine Openness and Acceptance helps him to connect with the lives of others - particularly those “others” who don’t fit the proper picture of religious respectability. Jesus’

unshakable belief in the extravagant Nature of Divine Compassion moves him to take *action* on behalf of those people who need it the most. And his faithful actions inspire those who follow him to act and live and grow together as a community of “saints” - a faith-full community, which even today continues to do some amazing things to encourage and enhance people’s lives.

Faith, for Jesus Christ, is a way of life. Faith *in* Jesus as the Christ - as God’s Anointed Example - is also a way of life. It starts with our remembering Christ’s life, and celebrating Christ’s still-living Story and Spirit. It allows that Life and Story and Spirit to take hold of our lives, to energize our spirits, and to stir-up in us the same kind of compassion and grace which are found in Jesus. It empowers us to follow Christ’s way of hope and joy, love and service. And that’s what it means to be a Saint. It doesn’t mean that we are amazing, “super-human” people - it means that we are very human people, who trust in the amazing Love of our Divine Source. And the more you and I learn to trust that we are completely loved and ultimately secure, the more we will be willing to give ourselves for the sake of others - to live our lives, as the Saints of God!

All Saints Sunday is an excellent day for you and me to *remember*. To remember the amazing life of Jesus Christ, in the breaking of the Bread and the sharing of the Cup. To remember the wonderful lives of those wonderful people who told us about the God of Love, and who showed us the Love of God. It’s also the perfect day for you and me to consider how we can continue to articulate - and show - that love to others. Because no matter how young or old, big or small, people today really need to hear some good news. And what better news to share with them, than the message of the extravagant, Divine Compassion that is revealed through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Today, on this All Saints Sunday, as we remember and celebrate the marvelous gift of faith that’s been passed on to us, you and I can be inspired to put that faith into action. To graciously pass it on to others - so that they might sing-out with joyful confidence, “Jesus loves *me*,

this I know - for the wonderfully welcoming people of Brecksville United Church of Christ *show* me so!" [O.K., maybe that isn't the most rhythmic ditty ever written, but you get the message - Just as the people around us will also get the message, when you and I show them the genuine, living compassion of genuine living saints!]