

**WHO NEEDS SAINTS?**  
*Sermon for St. Laurence Day*  
LPC, 8/13/17

*(Preached sermon differed significantly from the following, referencing recent racial violence in Charlottesville, VA and emphasizing saints as bridge-builders between God and humanity and between humans.)*

Today is the day we celebrate St. Laurence of Rome, whom Lawrencefield Parish Church has unofficially adopted as our patron saint. In years past I have outlined the hagiography of St. Laurence, who was martyred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century for defying the Roman Empire, but if you don't know the story already, you can read it for yourself in today's bulletin. Today I'm going to talk about saints in general, and talk about how saints are like heroes, and why this matters.

Saints in the Episcopal Church have a somewhat different function than saints in the Roman Catholic Church. Of course we share a lot of saints with the Romans, and St. Laurence is one of these. Shared saints include the saints of the Bible and the early and medieval church. On our end they kind of dry up after the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers weren't big on saints, mostly because of the Roman understanding of saints as intercessors for sinners and performers of miracles. Reformers rejected the notion of saints as intercessors and were suspicious of modern miracles.

In the first place, the Reformers' interpretation of Christian doctrine says that we already have all the intercessor we need in Jesus Christ. Typically, Reformers cite Scripture for their beliefs, and in this case they quote 1 John 2:1-2: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for sin." These words are part of the Absolution in Rite I of our Prayer Book. You can check it out on page 332. If you don't realize it, all the words in our Prayer Book were chosen with meticulous care, and these were originally included, back in the 1500's, to emphasize that Jesus Christ is the only intercessor a Christian should need.

Secondly, there is the issue of miracles. Reformers didn't exactly reject the possibility of miracles, but found them to be the source of a great deal of non-biblical and non-doctrinal superstition. Therefore the association of miracles with saints and their relics (those mummified body parts and other articles that were venerated throughout the Christian world and caused a great deal of unofficial competition between parishes and cathedrals) was rejected.

This doesn't necessarily mean that saints themselves were rejected. The more radical of the Reformers rejected saints, to the point of destroying statues and other saintly objects venerated in church buildings around the countryside, but saints continued in the Lutheran and Anglican traditions.

Since 1964, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church has included a Common of Saints in its common worship, and in 2003, undertook a concerted effort to "reflect our increasing awareness of the ministry of all the people of God and of the cultural diversity of the Episcopal Church, of the wider Anglican Communion, of our ecumenical partners, and of our lively experience of sainthood in local communities." Since then, the number of names in the Calendar of the Church Year has proliferated.

There remains a strictly observed set of criteria for inclusion in the Calendar of Saints, which I won't go into here. Suffice to say that the principal requirements are that the person be dead and be recognized both locally and widely as an exemplar of "God's redemptive activity." Miracles are not required, and absolute moral perfection is not required. The reason for this is to inspire all Christians with the notion that though we are all sinners, we have been redeemed and called to be saints through the salvation offered by Jesus Christ.

Do we need saints, in an absolute sense? Yes and no. As good Reformed doctrine holds, we have need only of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit to be redeemed. But as human beings we do need role models and inspiration. You could say that insofar as saints serve as role models and inspiration they are agents of the Holy Spirit, and therefore their efficacy is no more than God's action alone. God knows, oh how God knows, that human beings love stories. And the saints have terrific stories.

The saints are the heroes of the church. So let's talk about heroes for a minute. I googled "Heroes," and you know what I came up with? First, and most abundantly, references to a TV series about people with superpowers. Next were sports heroes. Then there were hits for video games and for a David Bowie song. The only hits for what anyone might call real-life heroes were for soldiers, especially soldiers wounded in the line of duty.

I am disappointed. I would at least like to have seen a reference to Capt. Sullenberger, who landed a distressed airplane without loss of life, or the tiny woman who jumped on a suspect who turned violent during an arrest and was reaching for the policeman's gun. Please don't tell me there are no heroes any more, or that we no longer value them enough to give them equal press to that of video games and sports figures.

In the church we still have real-life heroes, and we're not afraid to talk about them. They don't have super powers and they don't excel at sports. Neither are they not pale, passionless creatures with no flaws. They are the saints of the church. They are people who do what needs to be done without ever thinking of heroism. They are people who have a vision of goodness they know they will never attain. They are people who get discouraged and wonder if they're on the right track, like you. They are people who keep the faith against great odds. We call them saints and they are real people.

I wonder if the increasing fantasization of heroism in our culture is because the idea of serving a higher reality has become unmoored from the reality we know. Saints have to have a vision of something greater than themselves, but understand themselves as having a part, an investment, some skin in that something greater. And that something has to have a more lasting meaning than a TV show or video game. That something has to matter above everything.

Being victorious is not the essence of heroism. Being better than everyone else is not the essence of heroism. Doing anything for the sake of one's own excellence or even one's own survival is never the essence of heroism, or of sainthood.

There are things that matter. There is a reality greater than ourselves. We do have skin in the game. There are people no holier than ourselves who been faithful to the end. The saints say, "Do not lose heart. If we did it, you can too."