

St. Andrew's, Norfolk, VA  
November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019  
All Saints (transferred)  
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Luke 6:20-31

“I sing a song of the saints of God,  
patient and brave and true,  
who toiled and fought and lived and died  
for the Lord they loved and knew.”<sup>1</sup>

Later this morning we'll sing that cherished old hymn, “I sing a song of the Saints of God.” To sing it is appropriate today because as we do on the Sunday closest to All Saints Day, the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, we celebrate and remember all the saints. So what do we know about the saints? We know that there are saints by the name of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We know that these are the saints for whom the 1<sup>st</sup> four books of the New Testament are named. We know that there was another one of Jesus' 12 disciples whose name was Andrew, whom also we call a saint. This is the same Saint Andrew for whom this congregation, this church is named and known by.

Well, at least that is a start for what we know about saints. You see, saints lived in the past, a long time ago, but saints also can live today. What do saints do that makes them saints? A good point of learning about saint-ness can begin with what we heard Deacon Marguerite read in the Gospel lesson, part of which is about what many of us have known as what we call the “Golden Rule.” Love your neighbor as yourself. How much does God actually expect of us when it comes to loving our neighbor? Growing up it's likely that we have come to believe that the requirements for loving your neighbor as yourself are met by just being kind to people. That's easy enough to do – until your neighbor starts acting in a way that you don't like such as forgetting to return the lawnmower that was borrowed last year or acting like a bully at school.

EVEN THEN loving your neighbor as yourself is relatively easy when compared with something else Jesus challenges us to do and be: love your enemies. When we get to the idea of loving our enemies, the difficulty of being Christian begins to be an authentic challenge. What would it look like to actually love your enemies?

Some years ago there was a man by the name of Will Campbell. Will grew up in the 1930s in a close-knit though poor Mississippi family. Early on Will thought he was called to become a baptist minister. He was able to pursue that dream through getting a good education and being supported by some people who cared for him. While he was a campus chaplain at Mississippi State University he developed a passion to help the divided races of people in his home state find ways to come together. Having grown up the segregated and racially divided south myself I know that it may be difficult for some today to understand just how divided we were back then. As today so many of our

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<sup>1</sup> “I sing a song of the saints of God,” The Hymnal (New York: Church Publishing Corporation) Hymn 293, 1982.

divisions are about things political, back then our divisions were about the color of a person's skin. A little more than three weeks from now many of us will be around family, friends, and neighbors at a Thanksgiving feast. At a lot of those gatherings there won't be much conversation around the dinner table about the political beliefs people have. The political divide is just too great and the conversation is too painful. When Will Campbell grew up in the 40s and 50s the friction between people was about the races. If you lived in the south and wanted people with black skin to be treated with the same respect as those with white skin, you kept that thought to yourself.

Will couldn't do that. Not only did Will Campbell believe that Jesus had called him proclaim a message of racial equality, but also he'd been called to bring about the conversation in a radically different way. While serving the students of Mississippi State he embraced an uncharacteristic method to love his enemies. Whether you were a follower of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. or were a white-robed member of the Ku Klux Klan, Will did his best to treat you with love and dignity. Intentionally and openly he spent time with both groups. Some of his students at the university labeled him as "pro-Klansman," a charge that he never denied. His response was that yes, he was pro-Klansman, but adamantly not "pro-Klan." Even though his sympathy was with the persons who marched with Dr. King, he knew that the love of his God was not limited to one faction or the other.

Will Campbell believed that God's love for all people could and would put him in some awkward and difficult to understand situations. Much of Will's life has been an ongoing paradox. It was a paradox because he believed that at some point and at some time and in some place some one has to break the cycle of hatred and retaliation. He was known to stridently ask, "Who will break the cycle? Will you? Will I? Will We? Yes, WE MUST BREAK THE CYCLE, FOR THAT IS WHAT JESUS COMMANDS US TO DO."

Will Campbell thought he knew what would happen if he and others didn't break the cycle. Will had lived thorough World War II and Adolph Hitler's attempt to annihilate the global population of Jewish people through the work of murderous persons such Otto Eichmann.<sup>2</sup> Considering that horrible world experience and knowing that someone needed to end the cycle of madness, he once described what he thought could happen if the cycle is not broken: "If we are to suppose that all people are equally good then we must suppose that they are equally bad. If I live to be as old as my father I expect to see whites marched into gas chambers, the little children clutching their toys to their breasts in Auschwitz fashion, at the hands of a black Eichmann."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' command is both strikingly simple and profoundly difficult: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving your neighbor is a rule to which Jesus never provided any exceptions or escape clauses. To the best of my knowledge Jesus never said that we had to understand our neighbor in order to love him or her. The command was and is simply to love our neighbor. No exceptions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/adolf-eichmann>. Accessed 11/2/19.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.supersummary.com/brother-to-a-dragonfly/summary/>. Accessed 10/29/19.

Even more challenging is "...Love your enemies..." This is hard-to-impossible for the natural person to do. We don't call the people who do actively love their enemies "saints" for nothing.

Jesus spelled out his challenge to love our neighbors and to love our enemies as ourselves in a series of radical challenges.

Today the entire idea and concept of sainthood is entirely counter cultural – not that it has ever been anything else. Jesus challenges us to:

Consider poverty as a virtue and devalue wealth.

Strive to be hungry and work against fullness.

Consider weeping as the window to laughter.

Take being hated as normal.

Do good to those who curse us.

Pray for those who abuse us.

Give a person our shirt after they've already taken our coat.

Give to everyone who begs from us.

Jesus' call to be his followers is to be in an intentional relationship with all God's people, even though some of God's people are more than a little difficult.

How can I love those whom I hate? Taken literally Jesus is saying that those who hate, curse, abuse, strike, or rob Christians are to receive kindness. I sometimes wonder if when we sing, "Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love," if we even know what that what that commits us to be.

What will happen if and when we, following Jesus at his word, learn how to break the cycles of hatred and evil? For this, and this alone, Jesus gave his life on the cross. Jesus took all of that hatred and promised us the mercy of limitless forgiveness and love.

As Jesus' followers we are faced with the opportunities to live into that limitless forgiveness and love. This is not about first having to feel good about forgiveness and love. Rather, it is about living into what we know to be the right and good will of God in Jesus Christ for all those who will be his followers.

This morning a group of people our fellow Christians are going to publicly proclaim their willingness to live into their baptismal vows and publicly proclaim their faith in Jesus as their Lord. If you are one of those who will confirm your faith in Jesus, be received into this church, reaffirm your Christian commitment, or be baptized into Christ, please stand.

In just a few moments you and I will all gather around the baptismal font, a starting place where faith in the risen Lord Jesus begins, and proclaim that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever. As you do that you are going to proclaim, among other things, that you are available to be Jesus'

emissary on this earth our island home to break the cycles of hatred and love and live out Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. In fact, when all of us reaffirm our baptismal vows, we're making the same commitment. Candidates, are you ready to do this?