

Sermon  
All Saints Sunday  
November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott  
Reading: Luke 6:20-31

*What's the difference between a hero and a saint?*

Sam Wells asks this question in his book – and I commend it to you – called “Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics”.

Today we celebrate the feast of All Saints. We remember the saints who have gone before us. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live as saints not heroes. And so, what *is* the difference between a hero and saint?

One of the differences, Sam Wells says, is this:

“...the hero stands alone against the world. The story of the hero shows how he or she stands out from their community. Yet of the 64 references to saints in the New Testament, every single one is in the plural. Saints are never alone. Heroes have learnt to depend on themselves: saints learn to depend on God and on the community of faith...”

<sup>1</sup>*Saints are never alone. Heroes have learnt to depend on themselves: saints learn to depend on God and on the community of faith.*

Our Gospel passage this morning helps us to think about this – helps us to think about the difference between heroic and saintly living. You might actually be more familiar with the other version of these statements of blessing – these Beatitudes – which appears in Matthew’s Gospel. In Matthew these Beatitudes are part of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke doesn’t have Jesus speaking from a mountaintop. No – these statements of blessing and woe that we’ve just heard are spoken on level ground. This is the Sermon on the Plain. From the verses just before the ones we hear this morning, we know that Jesus did go up the mountain to pray, and after a night of prayer he appointed his disciples. But then:

*He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them (Luke 6:17-19).*

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<sup>1</sup> Wells, Samuel. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (p. 41). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

He came down on to level ground. He didn't ask those who came to listen, those who came seeking to be healed, those who were troubled with unclean spirits to make a spiritual pilgrimage up a mountain. He didn't take his disciples up the mountain to talk about the people. The people gathered around Jesus on that level ground were materially poor, they were marginalized, they were outliers, and they were vulnerable. Jesus was in their midst, meeting them – with them – in their vulnerability and their need. Jesus proclaimed blessing on that vulnerability. On that need. He didn't ask for any heroic effort, and self-sufficiency before they were blessed.

This helps us to know what to do with the woes that follow in Luke's version. It's about vulnerability. It's about heroism, and the difference between saints and heroes. Matthew's version goes on to have the disciples hear that they are salt of the earth and light of the world. But not in Luke! What comes next is woe to the rich and powerful. This can be uncomfortable to hear for those of us who are comfortable – affluent, even – financially. It's not so much about money and power, though. It's what we do with money and with power to protect ourselves from our own vulnerability. What we do to create an illusion of self-sufficiency. This way of self-sufficiency, of invulnerability is the way of the hero. The saint recognizes vulnerability and dependence on God and community.

That's easier said than done, though, isn't it? Our world is fixated on heroes, celebrating and promoting individual rights and freedoms, and individual successes. And, vulnerability is something that many of us actually work hard to avoid feeling, isn't it?

Author Brene Brown offers a helpful reminder about this. She reminds us that when we try to numb those things that are uncomfortable or pose a risk – feelings of sadness, grief, and vulnerability – we also numb our capacity to feel joy, satisfaction, and happiness.

Poet Mary Oliver wrote these words:

“We shake with joy, and we shake with grief. What a time these two have, housed in the same body.”

The saint knows that joy and sorrow are housed in the same body. The saint knows that light only comes through the cracks, that beauty is as much (if not more) about restoration as about creation, and that restoration is found in connection, and in community.

These verses about woe to the rich aren't the only challenging verses in this passage we are offered from Luke this morning. What about loving our enemies, turning the other cheek, giving and asking nothing in return,

doing unto other as we would have them do unto us? The difference between saints and heroes helps us with this, too.

Sam Wells also says:

“The hero’s story assumes that in a world of limited resources there is bound to be conflict at some stage so that good may prevail. But the saints assume a very different story. They do not need to learn how to fight over competing goods, because Christ has fought for and secured the true good, and the goods that matter now are not limited or in short supply. Love, joy peace, faithfulness, gentleness-- these do not rise or fall with the stock market. The saint's story does not presuppose scarcity...[and] it does not require the perpetuation of violence.”<sup>2</sup>

These verses about loving enemies, turning the other cheek, doing unto others are about honouring connections, and about how we are with God, and with one another in the world. This is not direction about tolerating abuse, but about living from a place of love, and gentleness, and connection. Living from a place of non-violent resistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Wells, Samuel. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (p. 40). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

God's story of love, and connection made known in Jesus *isn't* about heroes: the word hero doesn't appear a single time in the New Testament! This means that our story, as Christians is not about living as heroes but rather is about living as a community of saints. A community that recognizes and honours connections everywhere: between all of us, and through the whole of creation. A community of saints that recognizes there is no independent living, no outward individual action that doesn't have a "ripple effect" on the collective.

We gather as a community to be reminded that God promises to meet us in our vulnerability, in our need, in our brokenness. God is with us just as Jesus was with those gathered around him on that level ground in Luke's Gospel. I give thanks for the ways this community here at Ascension cares for one another in our vulnerability. May we continue to do that, and may we find new ways to meet one another in our joy and in our sorrow.

As we remember the saints and souls who have gone before us, may we find comfort and hope in living as saints rather than heroes, today, and every day. In Jesus name. Amen.