

Hebrews 12:1-2

Matthew 23:1-12 November 1, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BE SAINTS, NOT 'AINTS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

For all of you Carolina Panthers fans, after Sunday's tough loss, it may be too soon to listen to anything, good or bad, about the New Orleans Saints. With their 27-24 win last Sunday, the Saints have won their last three games and improved to 4-2 on the season. The Panthers dropped to 3-4. Including the 2009 season, when they won the Super Bowl, the Saints have gone 113-63, for a 64% win rate.

But the Saints haven't always had such an impressive winning percentage. In fact, since the franchise began in 1967, their overall record is 375-438-5 and they are 9-12 in post season play. They did not have a winning record until their 21st season in 1987. To this day, however, Saints fans remember the 1980 season as the absolute worst. The previous year the team had had their best season, breaking even at 8-8. Fans hoped for better things in 1980, but they were sorely disappointed as the Saints stumbled to a final record of 1-15, the first NFL team to lose fifteen games in one season. Their only win came at the expense of the New York Jets, and by only one point.

I remember my brother sending me pictures of the Saints fans in the Superdome wearing paper bags over their heads during the 1980 season. The disappointed fans called themselves the "Bag Heads" and started calling their team the 'Aints. Obviously, in the NFL it's better to be the Saints than the 'Aints.

The same can be said for the life of faith. And, in so many words, that's what Jesus told the crowds and his disciples when he warned them, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach." (Matthew 23:2-3)

Protestants in general, and Presbyterians in particular, are uncomfortable talking about "the saints" of the faith. And yet, we affirm our faith with the historic Apostles' Creed that includes the phrase "I believe in the communion of saints." If by "saint" you mean someone who is morally perfect and pure, then none of us would qualify, nor would all of those who went before us in the faith. But, if by "saint" you mean people who are characterized by and known for their relationship with God, then there is hope for all of us. Our word "saint" is related to the word "holy," which means "set apart by God and dedicated to the service of God." That's a wonderful description of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, and it's the life Jesus calls us to lead.

On this All Saints' Day, we remember the purpose of setting aside a day to remember and give thanks for the "communion of saints," that "great cloud of witnesses" that is cheering us on in our own race of faith:

* We give God the glory for ordinary, holy lives of believers in this and every age.

* We recognize the ongoing sanctification of the whole people of God — that is, how we live out the faith we have in and through Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

* Our hope in Jesus Christ and the encouragement from the communion of saints lifts us out of a preoccupation with our own immediate situation and the discouragement of the present.

* We are reminded that God was with the faithful of the past, and we are reassured that God is with us today.¹

It's because God has been faithful in the past, continues to be faithful in our lives today, and promises to be faithful always that we are called to be saints, not 'aints. In other words, we are called to “walk the talk and practice what we preach” — not to earn God's love, but as a way to give thanks for all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

Last Monday, there were probably plenty of Monday morning quarterbacks pointing fingers at the Panthers and criticizing the team for their loss to the Saints. Two thousand years removed from Jesus and the scribes and the Pharisees, it is tempting and so easy to do the same kind of Monday morning quarterbacking. We might even want to cheer Jesus on: “Yeah, you give it to 'em, Jesus! Way to call out those hypocrites!” But, if we listen carefully to Jesus' teachings against the religious leaders of his day, we might just realize that the same principles apply to our own lives of faith. As someone has commented, “It is easier to appear pious or to instruct others regarding their faults than to implement God's commands in our own lives.”²

Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and the Pharisees for not practicing what they teach is like a mirror we can hold up in front of our own lives. Notice that Jesus didn't criticize the religious leaders for what they were teaching the people. After all, they were teaching God's law. But he did call them out for how they interpreted God's law and used it to build themselves up rather than to serve God's people. In a nutshell, Jesus' criticism is summed up in his charge, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others.” (Matthew 23:5)

Trust me when I tell you that I am listening closely to what I am saying this morning. Here I stand, dressed in a black robe, wearing a stole with tassels on the end, teaching and preaching God's Word! And we hear these words of Jesus about “practicing what we teach” on a day when we will elect a Nominating Committee who will propose of list of men and women to serve as Ruling Elders in our congregation. But, as our *Book of Order* says about Ruling Elders, they are not called to rule as those who would “lord it over” the rest of us, but to discern and measure our church's faithfulness to God's Word and strengthen the faith and life of discipleship of all of us.

As a young man, Jorge Mario Bergoglio worked as a bouncer and a janitor in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Later he trained as a chemist and worked as a technician. After he recovered from a severe illness, he studied for the priesthood and entered the Jesuit order. You might know him better as Pope Francis. After he became Pope, he quickly became known as “the People's Pope” and “the Pope of the Poor.” To the consternation of many religious officials and with the admiration from many others, even outside the Catholic Church, Francis practices what he teaches. Instead of living in the

luxurious papal apartment, which his predecessor had completely renovated, Francis lives in a Vatican dormitory and eats in the guesthouse canteen. Instead of riding in a Mercedes Benz, he uses a Hyundai and a Kia Soul for his Popemobile. When he became Pope, he accepted a gift of a twenty year-old Renault with 300,000 miles for his personal use. He wears a plastic Swatch or Casio wristwatch and wears comfortable, black medical orthotic shoes, instead of handmade red leather loafers. And Francis wears simple white cotton robes.³

Jesus' words certainly ring true for church leaders, in his day and still today. But the principle Jesus teaches (and by which he lived) is echoed in the words of the apostle Paul to the people he called "all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints": "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Romans 12:3)

Do you have trouble thinking of yourself as a saint? Well, that's who and what you are, if you say you follow Jesus Christ. The good news is, God doesn't set a standard of perfection we have to meet in order to be set apart for his service. He calls us by his grace. On the other hand, God does call us to live a life worthy of our calling and pleasing in his sight and with the love of Jesus Christ. That's what it means to "walk the talk and practice what we preach." Jesus warns us against getting the big head as Christians, either by puffing ourselves up and looking down on other people, or letting other people put us on a pedestal. Remember, Jesus said, "The greatest among you will be your servant." (Matthew 23:11)

The margin note in today's bulletin next to the Opening Sentences is from St. Jerome, a 4th century Latin priest, theologian, and historian, who said, "Do not let your deeds belie your words, lest when you speak in church someone may say to himself, 'Why do you not practice what you preach?'"

In other words, let us hope and pray that, by the grace of God, people who hear what we say and see what we do as Christians won't want to put paper bags over their heads, but instead will recognize us as saints, not 'aints."

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us with our eyes fixed on Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹ "All Saints' Day," at www.presbyterianmission.org.

² Susan Hylén, "Commentary on Matthew 23:1-12," at www.workingpreacher.org.

³ Mark Ellwood, "How Unluxurious is Pope Francis, Compared to His Predecessors?" September 24, 2015 at www.bloomberg.com.