

“The Making of a Saint”
Revelation 7:9-17

November 4, 2012

All Saints Day

The recent canonization of Kateri Tekakwitha as the first Native American saint in the Roman Catholic Church has stirred interest in the nature of sainthood and how one becomes a saint. As best as I can tell, there are four major steps if you want to become a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. First, you have to have been dead for at least five years. This gives everyone some time to reflect on the person’s worthiness. Second, witnesses and testimony have to be brought forward that shows you have exhibited theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity), as well as cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Third, it has to be proven that you have performed some sort of miracle that cannot be explained by natural means. This leads to beatification, a step below sainthood. Fourth, it has to be proven that a second miracle has been done by you before you are finally declared to be a saint.

This kind of process leads to a couple of conclusions. First of all, we conclude that saints are super Christians in faith, as well as morality – much like the great multitude in our text for today. Secondly, we conclude that none of us here could fit into this definition of sainthood. Neither you nor I have any chance of becoming a saint if a saint means someone with a super faith, super morality, and super powers to do miracles.

The problem here is that this definition of saint is not a Biblical definition of saint. The word *saint* simply means “holy person”. Do you know how many people, by virtue

of what they have done, qualify as saints? Not a one. Not Pope John Paul II, not Mother Theresa, not you, and not me. We learned that last week in our readings for Reformation Sunday. Paul says in Romans, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23)

Maybe, just maybe, some would think, a person could overcome their sinfulness and achieve sainthood (i.e. perfect holiness). After all, we a culture of “second chances”, aren’t we? The Bible doesn’t allow for that either. Paul says in that same chapter in Romans, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” (Rom. 3:20) No one can even become right with God by living an exemplary life, much more achieve some super saint status. It is not possible to avoid all the bad God forbids. It is not possible to do all the good that God commands.

In fact, we want to do the opposite. The man we call SAINT Paul tells of his struggle, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” (Rom. 7:15,18,19) If this person who is known as a “saint” is unable to live a perfect life of faith and love and, in fact, often does just the opposite, what chance do we have? What chance does anyone have? The law does not help us become great saints. The law only shows what great sinners we are.

Then how do we make a saint? Remember the old phrase, “It takes one to know one”? That applies here. Only we would say, “It takes One to be one.” There is one person who qualified to be a saint – that is, a holy person who was completely free from sin; who did all the good which God requires; and who did none of the bad which God forbids. That saint – that “holy one” – is Jesus Christ. He is the holy Son of God “who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

God does not make saints by ignoring sin in human beings or “grading on the curve” and declaring to be saints those who have tried their best or done better than other human beings. God’s holy nature would not allow Him to do that. A human being can be a true saint in the Biblical sense of the word only if he or she is without sin and holy. Therefore, to make saints, God had to find a way to remove sin from sinners and give holiness to unholy people. He did that in Jesus Christ.

The agent of cleansing and transference would be blood. God declared that life was in the blood. Therefore, the blood of an innocent victim could remove the sin of a guilty person and transfer that innocence, that holiness to the guilty person as the sacrificial system in the Old Testament showed. The blood of bulls, lambs, and goats was sprinkled on the altar and even upon the people to cleanse them from sin and make them holy.

But all of that was pointing to something else – a divine dry run, if you will – someone that would come in the future: Jesus Christ. Jesus came, not merely to die

(by stoning, for example). Jesus came to shed His blood in dying on the cross. Only the blood of Jesus could truly wash away sin and convey holiness to all people of all time. And that's what it did. John writes in his first letter, "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (1 John 1:7) Jesus' blood purifies. It washes away sin and makes pure the one whose sin has been washed away.

In our text, "the great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" and shouting praise to God are not there because they lived exemplary lives on earth. They are not there because they held to certain virtues or did one, two, or a hundred miracles.

When one of the elders in heaven asked John, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?", he answers his own question when John hesitates. He says, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

These are ordinary human beings like you and me. They are sinners, like you and me, whose robes (i.e. lives) were not always white and holy. But they washed their robes in the cleansing and purifying blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ and made them white. Those who were sinful were justified – declared to be right in the sight of God – by the blood of Jesus Christ. Those who were unholy became holy when their sin was washed away.

The exact thing which happened for this great multitude in heaven is a reality for you and me, too. They didn't wait until they got to heaven to wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They did that during their life here on earth. You have as well.

You have been cleansed. In Ephesians, it says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (i.e. shed His blood) to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word," (Eph. 5:26-27) In baptism, the power to cleanse you from sin and make you holy is from the Word of God and the Word of God declares it to be by the blood of Jesus Christ.

He has done it all for you. As Paul says to Titus, "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:4-7) Our lives – our robes – are clean and white in the sight of God, even when they don't seem so to us.

We continue to wash our robes in the blood of the Lamb when, at His invitation and by His power, we make use of His Word and His Sacraments. We come into this sanctuary every Sunday, having soiled the garments of our lives by unholy living.

We begin Divine Service with the Invocation - "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - which draws us back to our baptisms where we were first washed.

We continue with the Confession of Sin where we hear the Absolution that, for the sake of Christ, the Lamb of God, and His shed blood on the cross, our sins have been forgiven; we have been cleansed once again; and we have been declared by God to be right – holy – in His sight.

As a token and a sign that this has happened and is true, we have the opportunity to receive the cleansing blood of Jesus and His holy body into our mouths in the Holy Supper, emphasizing once again that God has cleansed us and He has declared us to be saints – holy people.

This is a far cry from the canonization process of the Roman Catholic Church. In that system, a person earns sainthood which is then conferred upon him by the Church to only a select few. However, according to the Bible, the holiness required for sainthood has been earned by Jesus Christ – His perfect life and His shed blood on the cross – and is given freely by God to anyone and everyone, no matter how good or bad they might appear to be, who, by faith, have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

You are saints by the grace and mercy of God our Father through the efforts of His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, let us live as saints now. It won't be a flashy existence. John says in our epistle reading that the world won't know that we are saints because it didn't know who Jesus was. "We are God's children now, but what we will be has not yet appeared."

It will often be an existence marked by suffering, persecution, and rejection. Jesus describes the life of a saint in the Gospel reading. We will be "persecuted for righteousness' sake". People "will revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on [Jesus'] account." (Matthew 5:11)

But Jesus does not tell us to be discouraged or give up. He says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." That reward is described in our text for today. We will be part of that great multitude around the throne, praising Him day and night. "[We] shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike [us], nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be [our] shepherd, and he will guide [us] to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes." (Rev. 7:16-17)

Saints of God, made to be saints by the mercy of God through the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us and makes our robes white, rejoice! Rejoice in who you are now as saints of God, no matter what kind of evil and sinfulness faces you in the world. The world won't know you to be saints. But you know who you are. More importantly, God knows who you are. Rejoice also in what you will be as saints of God. As John

wrote in the epistle, "We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2) That has come true for Evelyn, Richard, Esther, Dennis, and Margie. It will come true for us and for all, who by faith, "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." God grant that for Jesus' sake! Amen.