

"Saints and Children"
Sermon for All Saints Sunday
Lectionary Year A
November 6, 2011
Texts: 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
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I have a confession to make. When Jo Lester talked to me about having Harper's baptism today, my first thought was of Roy Allen. I know you probably are asking, "Why did your mind go there, Pastor David?" I will tell you. You see, when I first came to Schreiber, Roy Allen was the church's Lay Leader. One of the things he made extremely clear to me as his new pastor was the pride he took in the fact that worship services here last fifty minutes. Not sixty and certainly not seventy or eighty or ninety. Fifty minutes, period. So when Jo requested that we baptize Harper this morning, I easily could imagine the service going a little long—given that this is All Saints Sunday and Communion Sunday, with a special UMW presentation to boot.

But of course I told Jo that I thought that an infant baptism on All Saints Sunday would be an especially wonderful thing, because celebrating both of these occasions on the same day would remind us of what is sometimes referred to as the rhythm of life. Some of our loved ones come into this world while others leave our presence. We

wind up saying hello and goodbye, welcome and I miss you almost at the same time. That is simply the way life is, and so we spend our lives between the sadness of losing those who have meant so much to us and gaining new persons to love and cherish. Saints and children.

So I am ever so happy that this morning we have honored our saints, blessed this baby, shown our gratitude to Bert, and will, in just a few moments receive the means of grace at the table of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But back to Roy Allen for a moment. In order for all these things to take place this morning, something has to give if we are going to have anywhere close to a fifty-minute service and get to Luby's when Roy wants to. And that challenge brings to mind Keith Dancer, who was on the SPRC at the first church I served as pastor, and, much like Roy Allen did to me upon my arrival here, Keith told me that he never heard a fifteen-minute sermon he didn't like. And that is what you are going to get this morning. Please don't applaud or shout "Amen".

Saints and children. What do they have in common? All we have to do is look at our lectionary texts for this morning and get a clue. If we give our attention in particular to the passage from 1 John we hear the familiar words, interestingly enough because they are used in every funeral or memorial service we have for someone who has died, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been

revealed. What we do know is this: when he [Jesus] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

The Christian pilgrimage of faith involves the journey from being children to becoming saints, and we become saints by becoming like Jesus. And here is the most interesting and ironic aspect of walking this path: *the more we become like Jesus, the more we become children*. Let me take just a couple of minutes to explain what I mean.

Saints and children have several things in common. First of all, **saints and children are trusting**. How many times have you seen a small child, sitting on the hood of a car or standing on the tailgate of a pickup truck and facing a dad or mom with arms wide open saying, "Jump"? And with a big smile on his or her face, the child, with no hesitation, leaps into the arms of the loving parent. That's trust. We are born trustful; we have to learn to be distrustful. Saints of the church come to understand this in their pilgrimage of faith, and so they come to the end of their lives and are asked by their loving heavenly parent to jump into his loving arms and they do so with no hesitation whatsoever, because they are as trusting as children.

Saints and children are accepting. Not only is being distrustful something that we learn in life, being non-accepting, exclusive, prejudiced, and judgmental of others are learned behaviors. We have

to be carefully taught to have these attitudes, because they don't come naturally. Children aren't born thinking and acting in these ways, and saints of the church, true followers of Jesus Christ, seem to be able to let go of them over time. Maybe it is because saints figure out that it takes too much work, too much effort, too much time and energy, to dislike or even hate other people just because of who they are. Saints and children.

Saints and children are honest. Saints and children are not deceitful. They don't operate with any kind of hidden agenda. They always tell it like it is. As you know, I lead chapel on Thursdays and Fridays for the Preschool children. It's one of the most enjoyable things I get to do as a pastor, because, in the words of the late Art Linkletter, kids do say the darndest things.

For chapel each week, I use a letter of the alphabet, and we talk about a word that we use in the church that begins with that letter. The first week of chapel this year, we obviously were talking about the letter "A", and I discussed the subject of angels with the kids. A little girl wanted to make sure I knew that her name starts with an A, but she didn't stop at that point in letting me know about herself and her life. She went on to tell me that she has a little brother and a mommy and a daddy. For some reason I asked her which of them she likes best. Her reply: my uncle.

Children don't lie. At least at a very young age, they don't tell you what they think you want to hear. Neither do genuine saints of the church. Dishonesty has to be learned as well. And think about it. Isn't being honest a lot easier than being dishonest in the long run? That makes so much sense yet seems to be an extremely hard lesson to learn. Ask our politicians; they just don't get it. But saints and children do.

In addition to being trusting and accepting and honest, **saints and children are peaceful**. I like that in Matthew's version of the beatitudes, he has Jesus saying that "blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." *It's hard to be a peacemaker, maybe even impossible to be one, if you are not at peace within yourself.* Saints and children are. That means they are not extremely fearful, not overly worried, not unduly anxious. They are at peace.

I spent some time yesterday morning in the hospital with one of the true saints of this church, Willie Johnson. For me, spending any time with Willie is both an educational and a humbling experience. Here she is, exhausted from the number of tests that have been run on her, ready to come home, disappointed that they can't really seem to figure out what is going on with her—and yet, at perfect peace about it all. As the saint she is, she is ready for whatever is the next step or

the next scene or the next stage in her life. She is ready because she is at peace. Saints and children.

So how do saints become children? How do those who follow Christ as Savior and Lord become childlike? We often hear that life is a learning experience and that we are never too old to learn. For the most part I agree with that. We never should quit learning.

But I would suggest that the opposite is true as well. Jesus taught that in order to gain life we must lose life. I think in order to become saints of the church, those who started out as children like Harper, we must become like children again. We must be trusting and accepting and honest and peaceful. How do we do that? We unlearn. *We unlearn.* We make the conscious decision to unlearn those attitudes and actions that keep us from being saints. *We unlearn* being distrustful; *we unlearn* being prejudicial; *we unlearn* being dishonest; and *we unlearn* being fearful. We unlearn these things so that we can become more like children, and when we become more like children we will become saints.