

Sunday following All Saints' Day
November 2, 2014
Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose
Revelation 7:9-17
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

In my library at home I have a thick book filled with the biographical stories of the saints of the church. They are fascinating to read, and we have enjoyed learning about these saints for years, as the focus for our readings and homilies at the Wednesday morning healing services.

There is St Stephen, who in 34 AD was stoned to death for his verbal attack on the Jewish leaders for their responsibility in Jesus' execution. They flatly denied that Jesus could be divine; but Stephen, as he was dying, said that he was seeing a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

There are Saints Perpetua and Felicity of Carthage, in northern Africa, who were arrested during the persecution of Christians under emperor Severus in 203 AD. Perpetua was a prosperous young woman with a newborn baby. Felicity was her servant. They both refused the order to recant their faith, despite the imperial order, the pleading of Perpetua's father, and even the judge who pronounced the sentence of death in the arena. Before her death, Perpetua stated, "For this cause came we willingly unto this, that our liberty might not be obscured. For this cause have we devoted our lives."

There is Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India, who served the very poorest people of India for many years. She was a Catholic nun, who one day received a call from God, which she described this way; "He wanted me to be poor with the poor and to love him in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor." She once said, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." She died in 1997.

These are some examples that the church has designated as saints. But the whole community of saints consists of that whole 'great cloud of witnesses' that are described in Hebrews 12:1.

At the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was teaching his disciples what kind of life was required of his disciples. Part of that teaching contains what we call the beatitudes. These are announcements of God's favor, both now and in the future... These qualities define the qualities of saints.

I discovered a very interesting way to see the message of the beatitudes. The first four focus on those who suffer now, but who will receive justice when the full reign of God comes. So the poor in spirit are those who come to God

with open, receptive hearts. Those who mourn are those who show real sorrow over the wrongs and sufferings in the world. The meek represent the dispossessed of the world who will not be denied forever. And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who work to set free those who suffer unjustly. These are qualities of saints.

Now the second set of four blessings promise blessings for those who work to provide release for others who are suffering from the conditions described in the first four Beatitudes.

Only those who practice mercy will know how to receive mercy themselves. Only the pure in heart, who seek God with a single-minded devotion will see God NOW as well as in the age to come. Only the peacemakers are named 'children of God', because their lives are reflecting the very nature of God. And finally, for those who are persecuted for their faith in God, there is an eternal reward that waits for them in heaven.

And so there is a call to live in such a way that we can be open to blessing from God (first four), AND we are to be a blessing to others (last four).

Each of us is to be blessed, and to be a blessing.

During the week someone handed me \$100 as an offering. That is a lot of money, and I knew it was a lot of money for that person. So I said, 'Are you sure this is okay for you? It is a lot of money.' The response I got was, 'I have received so much blessing from God, that this money is nothing in comparison. Please don't deny me sharing such a small thing back to the church, compared to what God has done for me.' To be blessed and in turn to be a blessing to others: That is walking the way with Jesus.

We are all called to be saints: to live toward receiving God's blessing, and to be a blessing to others.

We give our thanks on All Saints' Day to those who came before us, and those who are among us now, who help us, through their example, to live the Christian life. We thank those people who encourage us in our faith, teach us the beliefs we hold, and model for us the life God calls us to live.

May God bless the community of the saints; past, present and future, whom we thankfully honor today. Amen.