What is a Saint? The Word Always Becomes Flesh

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"Behold, the home of God is among mortals."
Revelation 21.3

On All Saints Day, it is appropriate to ask the question, "What is a saint?" But I want to start the sermon this morning by talking about ideas. Have you had any good ideas lately?

Here at the Cathedral, whenever we have a staff planning meeting, or a strategy meeting, the staff is accustomed to hearing me say some predictable things. One is this: "Good ideas do not count. There is no such thing as a good idea,.Unless. Unless someone is willing to act on it. Unless someone is willing to lead it. Unless someone is willing to follow and attend it." We hear all sorts of suggestions about new projects and classes and strategies. None of them can be called "a good idea" unless someone is willing to lead it or act on it, or attend to it.

By definition, I claim, the only good ideas are those that have results. A good idea takes on some sort of physical reality.

This morning, I want to make the same claim about the spiritual life. Surely, most of you (if you are here this morning) agree that there is something good about the spiritual life. Even if we have varying definitions about what the spiritual life is, we agree that it is a good thing to be spiritual. Maybe our definition of the spiritual life is the life of love, or being aware of the transcendent, or living in joy and peace, or living in harmony with the world and other human beings.

These can be classified as spiritual qualities; they are lofty ideals. But I make the same claim about these qualities as I do about good ideas. The only true spiritual life is one that has results. The true spiritual life has someone acting on it, has people attending to it.
In fact, the true spiritual life always takes on some sort of physical reality. Let me say that again: the true spiritual life takes on some sort of physical reality.

The Gospel of John put it this way: In the beginning was the Word. In the beginning was the "Logos." In the beginning was the Idea. Yes, the Greek word "logos" can mean all sorts of things; it can mean word, or rational principle, or even idea.

What an idea the mysterious God of the universe must have had! In the beginning was the idea! And then, says the Gospel of John, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Idea became flesh and dwelt among us."

This verse summarizes eloquently the "incarnation principle" of Christianity. The word does not stay merely word. The idea does not stay merely idea. We Christians believe that, in Jesus Christ, the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

But the incarnation principle of Christianity holds that the word continues to become flesh. Incarnation means not just that God became flesh once, in Jesus of Nazareth, but that God continues to become flesh. This is what today's scripture from the Book of Revelation means, "the home of God is among mortals" (Rev 21.3). God dwells with humanity. God lives in humanity.

It has been said that this continuing doctrine of the Incarnation is a primary doctrine of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican tradition of Christianity. I agree. The Incarnation means that we take flesh seriously. In outreach, we serve flesh and blood. In liturgy and worship, we appeal to the physical human senses. In fellowship, we enjoy relationships with other physical beings. In theology, we love to use our brains and intellect. These are all ways that we take flesh seriously.

We see God in other people, in other flesh. On this All Saints Day, we acknowledge with gratitude all those people, all that flesh, in which we have glimpsed something of God. When we acknowledge the communion of saints, we are acknowledging the presence of God.

I still enjoy quoting the wise writer, Frederich Buechner, when it comes to defining a saint. When he tries to explain how a saint is someone who shows us God, Buechner says it this way: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints." (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking. 1973. p 83.)

Other people have called saints icons, or windows. "A saint is a window through whom one can see God." Surely we know that saints are human, often filled with the confusion of both tears and laughter, both anger and good will, both gentleness and impatience. Saints come in all shapes and sizes, just like all these Halloween costumes that we have seen in the past few days. Saints come with all sorts of beliefs and doctrines, too. Saints are flesh.

Where I grew up, down in Coweta County, there were always people around us who were just too spiritual. They were so spiritual that they were oblivious. They were idiots when it came to ordinary life. Maybe you've heard the expression we used: Well, old so-and-so, he is so heavenly-minded, that he is no earthly good!

"So heavenly minded that he was no earthly good." That's the trouble with a lot of spiritual people these days. So what if we have incense and chakras and herbs and alternative prayers strewn all around us? Are we actually connecting to anything here on earth?

The great examples of faith are those who are both spiritual and industrious. They are able to turn their spirituality into physical reality. In fact, they turn their spirituality into flesh. They get things done. They are down to earth. In fact, they are really "down to earth." They are humble, and the root of the word "humility" is "humus," "dirt." Humility means being "earthly;" and "humus," as every gardener knows, means "good soil." A humble person is good soil, full of potential and good life.

And a good gardener knows how to tend that good soil. The good gardener knows how to coax that seed of an idea so that it becomes a physical, growing, organism. The seed of an idea takes on flesh.

Good soil helps a spiritual possibility becomes a physical reality, I call this move from spiritual reality to physical reality something else. I call it that very word which many of us consider "scandalous" these days. I call it "religion."

Yes, religion. As soon as anyone attempts to transform their spirituality into reality, they have got religion. And I think that is a grand thing indeed. I believe that religion is the natural result of authentic spirituality.

"I'm spiritual," people say, "but I don't want to be religious. I don't want to be connected to all that other stuff. I don't want to worry about whether the ankle bone is connected to the knee bone and then connected to the thigh bone. I don't want to worry about taking care of blood vessels and muscles. I don't want to worry about exercising tendons and ligaments. I just want to be spiritual. I don't want a religious body."

That's what they are saying. But they are wrong when they say that. For, it is impossible to be spiritual without some sort of physical reality, some sort of religious body. This is the great truth of spirituality. Consider the very resurrection of Jesus

Christ. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he had a body. He was not simply a dis-embodied ghost, a free-floating spirit bounding around from dream to dream. (When you see all these little ghosts dressed up for Halloween, use them as object lessons for this principle: each of those little ghosts, those little "spirits," is really a living, physical body! Each of those skeleton costumes indicates a body!)

The truth of the Resurrection is that God resurrects bodies! God needs that ankle bone to be connected to the knee bone and connected to the thigh bone. God needs those tendons and ligaments. God lives in the physical world around us.

The word "religion" comes from the same root word as does our word "ligament." Ligaments tie bone and cartilage together in our bodies. "Religion," too --"re-ligio"-- means "to tie something back together." Good religion ties together. Good religion holds together our spirit and our body. Good religion is good relationship! Good religion is good incarnation!

So, there is no such thing as healthy spirituality without religion, without relationship. The moment we actually try to do something with our spirituality, the moment we try to connect our spirituality with other people, or with some project, or with the world, --we become saints! Saints occur when we turn dreams into deeds.

That is how Clarence Jordan defined faith. Jordan was the great Baptist farmer and scholar (and saint) who also started Koinonia Farms down in South Georgia, a great example of making his spirituality religious. He made a delightful translation of the New Testament into colloquial South Georgia dialect, which he called the "Cottonpatch Version of the New Testament." The usual translation of Hebrews 11.1 is something like this: Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Clarence Jordan said that "Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds."

"Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds." Faith turns ideas into physical reality. Behold, the dwelling of God is with mortal flesh! Saints are the physical realities of God's presence in the world.

My word this day to all the saints is this. Don't just be spiritual. Be religious. Turn your dreams into deeds. I know we have spirituality. I, too, long for the transcendence and love and joy and peace of spiritual experience. But I long for religion, too. I long for those spiritual qualities to be connected to the physical world.

I long for the Word to become flesh. Behold, the dwelling of God is among mortals! When the word becomes flesh, we have saints.

AMEN.

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Here I use material from two of my previous sermons and presentations. See "I Am Spiritual, But I am Not Religious," the sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler for Easter Sunday at the Cathedral of St. Philip on 23 March 2008. See also "Faith Always Seeks Knowledge," a presentation by the Very Reverend Sam Candler for the Piedmont College Convocation on 27 August 2008.

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