
Saint Carlton Is Lowest

**A sermon preached on the Day1 radio program
by the Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler
Luke 6:20-31
All Saints' Day - Year C**

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.*

*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

*But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.*

*Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.*

*Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Carlton was not a high standing man according to the world-in fact, he was a low man in the world; but I always think of Carlton on All Saints Sunday. Saint Carlton.

At a certain time in my life, Carlton was a saint. Not a particularly holy man. Not an ardent defender of the poor. Not a figure of deep wisdom. At times, in fact, he was about the most pitiful person I could imagine.

I first knew him as another odd friend of my parents'. He did not cut an impressive figure, and I am embarrassed to admit that my sisters and I found it fun to laugh at him, and with him. He seemed to get sick a lot, and to never have much money. He told outlandish stories of having been shot down in the Korean War, falling into a rice field, and having his feet grow together in prison. Where in the world did that story come from?

His eyes were bad, so bad that he wore thick glasses. At night, he loved to look at bright lights through those glasses, because he said the lights would turn into shimmering kaleidoscopes. So he couldn't drive at night; he was frail. As I said, his name was Carlton, the same name of a popular cigarette that advertised itself as having the lowest amounts of nicotine

in the industry; "Carlton is lowest" proclaimed the ad. And so we children laughed every time we saw the roadside ad. "Carlton is lowest," because he was.

It is an All Saints miracle, that somehow, through his bumbling behavior, and through his stumbling care for me, Carlton showed me something about God. Essentially, for all his lowly behavior, Saint Carlton simply cared. He cared for people, no matter how they responded or reacted to him. And he seemed to care for a wide range of people.

He had one particular question that he asked almost everybody. In most private conversations, at some point or another, he would ask, "What are your secrets?" Sometimes we told him; sometimes we didn't. But he usually knew anyway.

What happened was this. To speak with the lowly Carlton was to experience a freedom from pretension or anxiety. There was no need to impress him, or to brag, or even to complain or ask for things. Time even stopped; we were free of time. His emptiness provided a safe place for me to know myself, to know life, and, indeed, to know God.

Part of the reason Carlton could show me God was that he was poor. For the last part of his life, he lived alone in New York City in a small, long-held, rent-controlled apartment for which he paid an astoundingly small rent. He was poor materially. Later in his life, he was often poor spiritually. He was truly low. When he was depressed, and I was older, my telephone calls were designed to cheer him up, not me. Carlton is lowest.

His poverty is the reason I understand this first verse of the Beatitudes, according to Luke: "Blessed are you who are poor; for yours is the kingdom of God." As painful as poverty is, it also means that there is not much to get in the way of one's experiencing God. To be poor is to be able to know God directly.

Biblical scholars have long pointed out the curious difference between the Beatitudes according to Luke, and the Beatitudes according to Matthew. Most of us recite Matthew's version: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Luke's version, the one we read today, is starker and more bare; there we read, "Blessed are the poor." Period.

Saint Carlton is proof for me that both Matthew's and Luke's version are right. Blessed are the poor, in both a material and a spiritual sense. If we want to find holiness in life, if we want to be blessed, we will know poverty in some way. If you want to meet a saint, look to the poor - those who have little getting in the way of their experience of God.

A saint will be someone who knows emptiness. Someone who needs no pretense or deceit. Someone whose purity of heart allows God to be present in a startling way. Someone who is able to know my secrets. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the poor in spirit. So I remember Saint Carlton.

It is not just the radiantly holy and the astoundingly wise who are saints. Poverty, and poverty of spirit, are the reasons that infants and children can be saints, too. Can there be any more empty person than a newborn child, hungry and curious, who yet has such an enormous capacity for God? If we have eyes for it, these infants show us the mystery and wonder of God. So, the sick, too, can be saints. The elderly are saints; they show us the mystery and wonder of God. And, again, they know our secrets.

Even your intimate other can be a saint-the one you love. If you look into her eyes, if you look into his eyes, and see mystery-and if you know at that moment that there is something else in the world besides the material and the obvious-then that person is a saint.

Frederich Buechner, in his old and delightful book called *Wishful Thinking*, still has one of the most famous definitions of a saint, worth repeating. He said, "In his holy flirtation with the world, God sometimes drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints."

Holy flirtation. I wonder if flirting has gone out of fashion. Things go by too quickly in our sped-up world. There is no time for relationship, for that delicate and delicious give-and-take of getting to know someone, getting to know their secrets. There is a spirit in the world-an evil one-that tempts us toward the raw and the immediate, the quick and the dirty. That spirit seems to offer fulfillment (it seduces us), but it has no life. Because it has no mystery, no secrets.

God comes to us in mystery, over time, indeed (as Buechner says) in a holy flirtation with the world. The way we will know God is to let time stop, to not be in a hurry, and to learn from the person sitting next to us.

One of the great advantages of growing older (there are advantages!) is that we come to know a variety of saints. In our younger days, we respect or honor only one sort of person: perhaps our parents. Or our family. The neighbor who looks much like us. But, the broader our life is, the more we know the grace of God through other people. We begin to recognize that other people, people different from us, are not strangers, but are saints.

The author, Michael Malone, writes with Southern realism and expansive wit, and he almost always includes nuggets of real wisdom about religious life. A few years ago, his mystery thriller called *First Lady* featured some stars-rock stars, political stars, social stars; and it featured a minor character who was an Episcopal priest.

At one point, the priest reflects on what makes a saint:

"What makes a saint? If stars are the light, then I'd say saints are people the light shines through. Not just the famous saints, because the famous ones are stars, too. But the everyday saints around us in the world. Light shines through them and illuminates what they see. The light just goes right through them to what they love so that we can see its beauty. They don't get in the way because they're looking too." (Michael Malone, *First Lady*, page 426).

Saints are the people the light shines through. Blessed are the saints.

Blessed are you who are poor, said Jesus. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the peacemakers.

The Church uses all those words in the gospel for All Saints Sunday, the day when we remember the saints. As Michael Malone the author points out, those saints are not just the stars, not just those whose works outshone rest. Those saints are the everyday folks, the folks whom the light shines through. "The light goes right through them to what they love so that we can see its beauty."

The saints among us today are the poor, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, the meek, the peacemakers. Yes, there are some superstar saints in the world today. But most of us are not superstar saints. We are those who mourn and weep, who are hungry and thirsty for things.

The incredible truth of All Saints Day is that every one of us baptized persons is a saint in the eyes of God. We do not have to pass some sanctification test to be a saint in the eyes of God. God sanctifies us when we are baptized. God choose us, God claims us, to be vessels through whom the light shines.

Remember Malone's definition: The saints don't get in the way, because they too are looking at what the light is shining on.

Yes, I am discovering at least one very happy circumstance to growing old. The older I become, the more saints I get to know. Like Saint Carlton, most of us saints really are strange. I've been in some great communities where the saints have not all looked the same. They have not all acted the same. They did not even all believe in exactly the same way.

But they knew how to give. They knew how to serve. The saints I have known, whether poor or rich, weeping or laughing, hungry or full, have somehow pointed me to God in whatever they have been experiencing. They have looked to God, and the light shone right through them. "The light just goes right through them to what they love so that we can see its beauty. They don't get in the way, because they're looking, too."

What the saints are looking at is the love of God. Do you see it? Do you see that love through the magnificent communion of saints? Do you see that love through one another?

I hope so. The saints are those, in every generation, who show us God's love affair with humanity. The older, more established churches do have an advantage over newer ones: they have known a lot of Saint Carltons. They have weathered more storms. They have seen the crazy folks, the fringe groups, come and go. They have experienced tragedy. They have experienced joy. They know, from experience, that they will live through it. They have known a lot of saints, and those saints were not all the same sort of person.

This is why the Church celebrates All Saints Day. We've known a lot more saints than just the famous ones. We have known the non-descript, the bumbling, and the inept ones. The justly proud and the overly humble. The wonderfully

capable and the woefully decrepit. We've known the poor in spirit, those who are empty enough to show us God. At some point, each of them has provided a space for us to know God. We have known Saint Carlton, over and over again.

AMEN.

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