

For All the Saints
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Mary Koon
November 5, 2023

Prayer: Open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, O God, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

This morning we will read from the 23rd chapter of Matthew, the start of the chapter in which Jesus confronts the Pharisees and scribes, those who work with and for the temple officials. The Pharisees role was to interpret Torah – God’s law – and they knew the law well! Jesus’ problem with the Pharisees and scribes is not about their intentions toward God per se, but that they do not live out what they preach and teach, and perform their duties for recognition and status, placing undue burden on the faithful.

Listen now to how God is speaking to you through the words of Matthew 23: 1-12.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; ³therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

⁴They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the

synagogues, ⁷and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. AMEN

In our text today, Jesus teaches what it means to be a faithful saint, what we can aspire to. Don't be a hypocrite, a phony, a fake. Be sure not to elevate any human over another. Those who sit on a pedestal are sure to fall. Listen to Christ's teaching and serve with humility.

Jesus wants us to, “do as he does,” serving others without concern for status or power. Jesus calls us to love, compassion, forgiveness, justice, mercy, humility and to be bearers of hope. Living as disciples, being the church – not better, not with higher status than others– but set apart to do the will of Jesus - is as challenging now as it has always been.

There's an urgency to our ministry, as we face a world in which innocent people are killed by gun violence, when the lives of transgender children are threatened, and people sleep in shelters, are cold and hungry and live for years in refugee camps, where war continues to rage, and the climate is in crisis.

Faithfully following Jesus means being grounded in prayer, open to relationship, committed to community, and learning through listening. All practices that sustain us over a lifetime. Ways of being that can help us shed the human tendency toward self-importance and hubris to continue as Christ's people.

Jesus shows us what integrity looks like. His actions, his life, were a reflection of his inner soul. No masks, no pretending. This is our goal, too, though we fall short. And when we do, grace abounds.

On this All Saints Day, we remember people who had an impact on us as a community and as individuals. People who tried to live lives of faith. None of whom were perfect, or always humble, but utterly human and showed up to love as best they could.

As Christians we are united with all the saints of the Church: people who are scattered around the world and those who are around the corner; those who lived two thousand years ago and those yet to come; and those who are in our midst and those who have gone on to the church triumphant. We are all bound together through Jesus Christ. What a gift.

Today my heart is full of gratitude for those who showed up with their real selves, flaws, and all, and made a difference because of it. There are so many!

My mentor and friend Ken is a saint who has been on my mind all week. Ken was born on All Saints Day in 1925. After serving churches for nearly 50 years as a Presbyterian pastor, he became the parish associate of First Presbyterian in La Grange, Ill, where my family lived in the early 2000's. Standing at 5' 7" with a shock of white hair and twinkly blue eyes, he had a remarkable resemblance to George Burns, the actor whose career spanned vaudeville, radio, television and who was also known for his role in the movie, O God. Ken got a lot of mileage from that comparison. He'd call people and leave a message, "Hi! It's God calling!" and then he'd laugh and laugh.

Ken and I became friends the first day I attended his weekly Bible study at the church. I showed up a little skeptical and with a boatload of questions. Each week, he'd hand out papers with quotes from his

favorite authors, poets, musicians, and scholars, he called it Gleanings. The first week, one of the quotes was from Frederick Buechner. After finding out that I read Buechner, too, he leaned in close and said, “Oh, we’re going to get along just fine.”

Ken loved to offer blessings. Each Wednesday evening, in the tiny chapel of the church, he’d hold a small service of wholeness and healing, always with communion, and ending with blessing each forehead with oil as he whispered, “Shalom, Salem, shalom” Words that mean wholeness, completeness, health, peace. Ken was always the last to be anointed, and the hand that blessed him was typically one of a child who was in the service.

A prolific reader, he loved the writings of the faithful from different traditions, Buddhism, Judaism, Christian mystics and contemporary Christian scholars. I never asked him, but I felt that the authors and reading that Ken so loved were an essential piece of his life-long quest to discover what it means to be truly alive, whole and healthy. To be God’s faithful person no matter where life leads you.

Ken is a perfectly imperfect saint. He endured the breakup of a few marriages, and after years of dealing with alcoholism, became sober in his mid-60’s. He described his recovering as an experience of resurrection, which resulted in the gift of a new, healthy marriage, and church assignments later in life. Ken was always honest and vulnerable about his addiction. He didn’t hide, because he knew it was part of his on-going story and his honest allowed others to be seen, to feel heard. After finally retiring from church work in his late 70’s, Ken’s church became the world. He ministered with humor and grace to the nurses at his cardiac rehab, his multiple AA meetings, and even servers and cooks in restaurants he frequented.

As I progressed through seminary and toward ordination, Ken repeatedly offered to write me recommendations, he said he “lied good.” He was kind enough to send me a copy of his final recommendation letter (that I think was for the Christian Education position here) and it began with the words, “I’ve known Mary Koon for 84 years.”

Okay, so he didn’t know me for 84 years, but he knew the real me and seemed to delight in it. And that was a blessing that impacts me, still. Ken died three months prior to my ordination in 2014, which just happened to take place on his birthday weekend.

Today, we give thanks for the lives of the saints upon whose shoulders we rest, those who helped make us who we are today. I want you to think of someone now who is dear to you, imagine their face, hear their voice. I’m going to give us just a few moments to silently whisper thanks to God for the life of that person.

As saints in this place, may we continue the race that has been set before us, learning from Jesus, supporting one another in our human journey of discipleship with integrity, humility, and love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN