

Remembering Mel and all the Saints

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr. on October 30, 2011
Peace United Church of Christ, Greensboro, NC

The ancient Irish called them Samhain (*sow-an*), or “summer’s end.” Others have called them *Eallra Hālgena æfen*; All Hallows’ E’en or Halloween; All Saint’s Day; *Día de los Meurtos* or the Day of the Dead; All Soul’s Day. Regardless of the nomenclature, these days from October 31 to November 2 have been considered for centuries to be “thin” times when the boundaries between this world and the next are thought to be thinner and more permeable. And thus they became days when the spirits of our ancestors were welcomed, remembered and honored.

While I am who I am today because of my own choices, so too am I who I am because of my brother Philip and my two grandmothers, Pearl and Macon. I welcome an annual day when I can mourn their absence, celebrate the time I had with them, and say thank-you. And you, you are no different. You are no different as individuals and you are no different as a church.

As individuals you are who you are because of your relationships. Today on this our All Saint’s Sunday, Doris comes to remember a son, Maria a father, Ava an uncle and a father, Virginia a niece, David a mother, Bryan a grandfather, Nancy a brother, Temple a husband, and Bill and Lib a sister. But so too are churches formed by those who have gone before us. Individuals like Jerry Long and names like the Walkers and Greesons are part of the historical mythology of a place like Peace. And then there is G. Melvin Palmer.

What in the world do I say about Mel? Here in the sanctuary that Mel helped build, here amidst the history of 3 plus decades of pastoral ministry, what do I say? What do you say about the most famous pastor in the history Southern Conference of the UCC. I think I will start by saying thank-you.

A few months ago when Paula and I went to see Mel in the hospital, Mel blessed us. Yes, he was the patient. Yes he had seen better days and yes, he was dying and he knew it. But, he was so pastoral in those moments. He was utterly unanxious about dying and utterly aware of the ways God had blessed his life through his family and his church family. He wasn’t in the pulpit but he was still preaching and it was beautiful. Paula and I should have taken off our shoes.

I have lost track as to how often I have been in the presence of death. And yet, during all of those times, I don’t ever remember anyone smiling, really smiling immediately before their death. Mel did. And I think he died much as he lived.

As a pastor I honor the pastor Mel was, as a friend I thank him for his blessings on me, and as a theologian I hold him up to you as a saint of God. A saint Jim? Really? I mean yes, he was larger than life, but a saint? Do we dare ask Pat whether she would agree with that sentiment?

Usually when we hear the word “saints,” most of us think about St. Francis, St. Peter; perhaps even a Mother Theresa. And in the process we think of individuals who do extraordinary things; individuals with halos around their heads; individuals separated from the rest of humanity by their godliness and their holiness. And therefore and unfortunately, we think of individuals very much unlike ourselves. The truth is that there is not a single person listed in our bulletin today who sported a halo or who were ever suspected of being perfect. No, not even Mel. But can someone please tell me, where did we ever get the idea that saints are perfect?

Consider for a moment St. Peter. You might remember him; the disciple who denied his Lord and master. And then there’s St. Paul. I promise you that when yet another letter arrived from so-called St. Paul, more than one church rolled their collective eyes. Tension and disappointment followed him as if it were his own shadow. Then there’s St. John and St. James, the sons of thunder. You might remember they were the ones who got into a fight as to who was going to sit on Jesus’ right hand. “I am.” “No I am.” “He likes me better than you.” “No he doesn’t.” Sigh.

Really? Peter & Paul & James & John all were canonized as saints - all of them have their own feast day - and yet not one of them was close to being perfect. Somewhere along the way we were erroneously taught that saints are perfect people who walk around with pious looks engraved on their faces. And that's unfortunate.

In today's gospel lesson we hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and while it's not really a mountain, it is a really steep hill. But more important to this theologian, even while on this steep hill, Jesus is on the lowest place on earth with fresh water. He's at the bottom with the people who live and work on the bottom. He doesn't have a sermon for saintly scholars, literally up in Jerusalem. Galilee wasn't a place where the patriarchs and matriarchs of their faith had lived and dwelt. Jesus was in the middle of nowhere speaking with those who will never show up in the history books. It is a sermon for ordinary people who nonetheless can show forth the glory of God in the most ordinary places and in the most ordinary ways. And that my friends is what being a saint is really all about. A saint is an ordinary flawed individual, a beautiful mess, who reveals the holy in their ordinary, messy and flawed lives.

Saints are people like the farmer who gave Faith the cow and started the Heifer Project. No seminary education was necessary in that situation. He never knew anything about Peace UCC in Greensboro, but because of that farmer, there will be Living Gift Market here in December. And then there's my friend and folk singer David LaMotte who was honored last year by Heifer International for making a difference in Guatemala. Now when it comes to his ability to play a guitar, there is nothing ordinary about David. But David was an ordinary American who saw first hand the poverty of Guatemala as have so many other Americans. The difference is that David knew that even a poor folk singer could make a difference in ordinary ways. And so first he wrote a check so a school could get running water. The check was just over \$100. And then at his concerts he asked people to throw quarters and dollars in a bucket, not for him, but for this school that now had running water but needed so much more. Today there is a brand new school and it all started with St. David.

Saints: ordinary people who reveal God in ordinary places like High Point and Lexington and right here in Greensboro at Peace United Church of Christ. Now if you're looking for perfect people in a perfect church, I hope you like waiting. In fact, why don't you save yourself the trouble and go ahead and leave, right now. You're not going to have any luck finding perfect people in this church; not by a long shot. Now, having said that, if you believe holiness can be found in and through those who are broken and less than perfect, well you may not have to wait very long at all. In fact you may be amazed at what you find. For those with eyes to see, you'll find saints here in your midst.

Today in your bulletin you have a list of a few of God's saints. One was approaching a century in age, others were significantly younger. There were men and women. Some were probably professionals, others hourly wage workers, and yet others worked at home. Some were rich and others were something less than rich. Some had their lives taken by cancer, some died quickly; some did not. Some died alone; other surrounded by family. But they all laughed and they all cried and we were blessed to laugh and cry with them. And through each of them God spoke to us. Despite their brokenness and sometimes because of and through their brokenness, God spoke to us of the beauty of this life of ours and of this holy thing called love.

So thanks be to God for all of the brothers and sisters we mourn; both for those related to us by blood and those related by the waters of baptism. Thanks be to God for the ordinary ways we loved them and for the ordinary ways they loved us. May they all rest in peace.

But as for you, for the living, I'm not quite through with my sermon yet and I would be amiss if I did not say this to you. If you think that this church can not go into the future without Mel, then not only are you wrong, but you dishonor both Mel and you dishonor his ministry here. Yes

Mel did some amazing things here, but ultimately the success you experienced wasn't about Mel's personality, although the Lord knows God used that personality. Nor was it about his extensive education, although the Lord knows that education equipped him for a long and fruitful ministry. But what happened here was never about success. Our journey is not about success; our journey is about being faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Mel would never want to be remembered as a larger than life figure. Mel would never want to be remembered as "THE" pastor of Peace UCC. Mel would want to be remembered as nothing more than a good old boy from High Point/Lexington who first and foremost was faithful. And I have no doubt that were he here preaching this morning, he would look at you and say: Keep the faith. Do not forget who you are or whose you are for you are children of the Almighty, redeemed by the Son and sustained by the Spirit. I do not expect you to be successful; I expect you to be faithful. God does not desire perfection but fidelity and you the members and friends of Peace Church have everything you need to be faithful. You are the saints of God called to love others in ordinary ways and in ordinary places.

Until his dying breath Mel remained true to this holy task entrusted to him. May the same be said of each of us, and truth be told, there's no reason it can't be. Amen.