

All Saints Sunday, November 6, 2022
 “Saints and Sinners” (Luke 6:20-31)

A member shared a book with me this summer, titled, *Accidental Saints*. It was written by Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Webber. In the opening chapter, she tells the story of coming to truly understand what it means to celebrate ALL Saints Day. Shortly after founding a new congregation in Denver, CO, Nadia was feeling overwhelmed and unsure of herself. She felt the need for someone to look to for inspiration – a strong woman of faith who had walked the road of church planting before her. Nadia thought she had found such a woman in Alma White, who, in 1918, became the first female bishop in the United States. But then she learned more. As it turns out, Alma White had been known, among other things, for her anti-Semitism, hostility to immigrants, and association with the Klu Klux Klan.

Nadia was so disgusted by this discovery that she told the story to a friend. This is where the discomfort comes in for Nadia. All Saints Sunday was approaching, so the friend suggested adding Alma White’s name to the Litany of Saints *along with all the other broken people of God*. This suggestion forced Nadia to confront the Lutheran understanding of what it means to call people saints. Nadia writes: *I didn’t want Alma White on the Litany of Saints, I want racists to stay in the racist box. When they start sneaking into the saint box, it makes me nervous. But that’s how it works. On All Saints Sunday, I am faced with the sticky ambiguities around saints who were bad and sinners who were good.*

Like Nadia, we too have boxes, don’t we? This is part of our human condition. We set criteria for *good* and *bad* and place others in one of those categories. We label people as either *sinner* or *saint*, based on how we feel about them and we approach our relationships with them differently. We don’t really like ambiguity. But life is ambiguous, which makes it difficult to label others and place them in a specific box.

We have certainly seen that this election season. A candidate comes on TV, citing the many good things he has accomplished, his passion for serving his constituents, and his promise to work hard in representing us. We want to place him in the *good* box. But then his opponent airs a commercial, telling us how underhanded or greedy the first candidate is, how ineffective his leadership will be, and how he can’t be trusted. Now, we want to place him in the *bad* box. So, into which category does he fall? Is he a saint, or is he a sinner? Ambiguity! And ambiguity is the reality we face on this All Saints Sunday.

In our gospel text from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, we find that our categories don’t hold up. Oh, at first glance, it seems that Jesus’ proclamation of blessings and woes offers us a clear pair of contrasting lists that define opposing categories of people. First come the blessings for those who are poor, hungry, weeping and persecuted for Christ. Then come the four woes for those who are rich, full, laughing, and well-spoken of. Two lists. Perfectly balanced. Those who will be blessed and those who are doomed to woe. Those on whom God apparently looks with favor and those on whom God frowns. Or using the categories of this day: those who are saints and those who are sinners.

It looks like a system of clear-cut, mutually exclusive groups. But it's not a comfortable division. We don't want to have to be poor, hungry, weeping, or persecuted in order to be saints, do we? And we certainly don't want to be condemned as sinners if we are rich, full, happy, or accepted. So, if we have to choose between these two alternatives, it's a pretty disturbing task.

But I don't think Jesus is proposing a choice between two options. I believe he is describing *one* reality. Think about it. Jesus is addressing each blessing and each woe to every follower gathered there. He's looking into the same sets of eyes to announce both the blessings and the woes. He is giving them a description of their reality; a reality whereby both blessings and woes can face the same person; a reality not of clear categories, but of ambiguity.

We see this ambiguity in how the categories flow into one another. For example, the promise for the weeping is that they will laugh; the woe to the laughing is that they will mourn and weep. So, as one goes through life and situations change, boxes can be switched. An individual can be weeping at one point, and subject to the blessing. At another point, that same individual can be laughing, and subject to the woe. Life is fluid and subject to change, not constantly static. There will be good times and bad times.

This is the ambiguity of All Saints Sunday. We can't just put people in categories, because the categories won't always fit. And that's good news for us. We're all sinners. That's our reality. In spite of the good that is in us, each and every day we fall short of the glory of God. We deserve to live in a constant state of woe. But God, in his mercy, has made us righteous and justified us through his only Son. Claiming us as his own in baptism and joining us to the death and resurrection of Christ, God has richly blessed us with abundant life in this world and the promise of eternal life in the world to come. Therefore, we can't be contained solely in one box. We are good, and we are bad. We are sinners, but also saints, made holy by our Savior's work on the cross.

Martin Luther described this mixed and complicated reality with the Latin phrase, *simul justus et peccator*, meaning that we are simultaneously righteous and sinful. We are both saint and sinner. We are sinners when we seek to serve ourselves, when the things of the world become a priority, rather than God. We are sinners when we take God's blessings for granted, or worse, think that we have somehow acquired these gifts by our own efforts alone. We are sinners when we fail to honor God by employing our time, talents and treasures in serving him or others. Yet, we are saints because God has made us so. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. And nothing can erase that.

Having been blessed with the title of saint, each of us wants and tries to love God with our hearts, our souls, and our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We want to offer ourselves as a servant – to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. We want to follow Jesus' command to do to others as we would have them do to us. Sometimes, we are capable of living like a saint, but all too often, we are incapable of doing so. Many times we will be on the bad side of the list and be subject to the woes. But, thank God, we will always be a saint – holy and acceptable before God – not out of our own goodness, but out of the blessing of God's grace, through faith in Jesus.

So, today in addition to remembering our dearly departed loved ones, we celebrate the ambiguity that is our reality. We give thanks to God that we fit into more than one box or category. We are sinners, yes, but God has conferred upon us the title of saint. Amen.