

ALL SAINTS 2020

Sixty years ago, I made the trip from Omaha to St. Bonfacius, just outside of Minneapolis. The novice master, a Jesuit named Joe Sheehan, greeted my family, and then he welcomed me into the Jesuit family. Fr. Sheehan was the kind of person for whom simplicity was his strength. We novices all greatly admired him, not for any brilliance, but rather for his insight into our humanity.

There was one thing about him that struck me, or rather annoyed me. When I would go to him for my weekly meeting, he would respond to my knock with a loud, “Edward, child of God; come in, child of God.” I loved his whole heartedness, but I didn’t like being called a child. I was 18 years old, and I was trying my best to become a man. I heard the word “Child” but I did not hear the whole phrase, “Child of God.” Had I done so, I would have felt deeply honored.

In our second reading today, a letter from Saint John, we hear the same term. This time it is said to all of us. We are each and all the children of God. Now how do you feel about being called a child of God? Not just being called a child of God, but actually being a child of God?

John’s letter makes it clear: we are not only to be called God’s daughter or God’s son, but we actually are that already. What makes it so? The answer is straightforward: God’s love makes it so. When you love someone, that person changes in your eyes. A stranger becomes a neighbor. A co-worker becomes an ally. Another adult becomes a spouse. A bit of microscopic tissue becomes your child. In each case, love changes the relationship.

And John insists, God’s love for us changes our relationship to God.

Allow me to reimage this great grace in terms of a seasonal metaphor. Recently I went to Winn-Dixie, and there I saw huge boxes of pumpkins: big ones, little ones, even some with painted faces. Later, while preparing this homily, I came across a pumpkin homily. “What is it like to be a Christian saint?” “It is like being a Halloween pumpkin. God picks you from the field, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off you by inviting you to confess your sins. Then God cuts off the top and scoops out the yucky stuff. God removes the pulp of impurity and injustice and seeds of doubt, hate, and greed from you. Then God carves you a new smiling face and puts a candle inside. That candle is the light of holiness or, better, the Holy Spirit inside you. That candle brings smiles to children and brightens the world. God’s love lives in you!

You are a saint since God lives in you. That’s what it means to be a saint. When we talk about saints—other than when we are talking about our football team—we usually are referring to those great luminaries like St. Augustine, or St. Theresa of Lisieux, or St. Francis Xavier. It is appropriate to praise God for them.

But it can also be dangerous to do so. Sometimes we hear the phrase, “Well, I’m no saint.” If by that we mean that we are not living gloriously in heaven, OK. But saints also live in this world. We don’t usually say so, but Jesus was a saint, his mother was a saint, the apostles who tried to bring the gospel to villages and towns were saints. If you are right now in the

state of grace, then you are already a saint. The challenge then becomes whether you or I will live like the saint we have been chosen to be.

Let me tell another story. There was a traveling portrait painter who stopped in a small village hoping to get some business. The town drunk—rich but dirty, ragged, and unshaved—came along. He said he wanted his portrait done, and the artist agreed. He worked painstakingly for a long time, painting not what he saw but what he envisioned beneath that disheveled exterior. Finally, he presented the painting to his customer. “That’s not me,” the man shouted. The artist gently laid his hand on the man’s shoulder and replied, “But that’s the man you could be.” Today’s feast reminds us that we all can become saints, because underneath all the sinful things we do, there is the Spirit of God in us.

In two days, we Americans will have local, State, and National elections. I have already voted, and so perhaps have most of you. So I am not trying to change any votes. But as a preacher, I would not be out of bounds if I close with questions that I implicitly used when I voted. Perhaps you can ask yourself the same questions.

1] When I voted, did I ask which candidate is closer to being poor in spirit?

2] Was one of my criteria to ask, which candidate is able to mourn for the plight of others?

3] When it comes to running for public office, it is not easy to be a person who is meek. But which candidate gives some evidence of that?

4] Surely in our present age of the Church’s teaching, I had to ask for whether my candidate hungered and thirsted for justice.

5] Jesus tells us that we must look inside a person and choose those who are inclined to be merciful. President Trump has pardoned a lot of his friends, so is that what Jesus meant by being merciful?

6] It may seem outrageous to expect that a politician be “clean of heart.” But it might be nice to give a nod to that criterion.

7] Jesus adds, Blessed are the peacemakers, and perhaps no US president can aspire to that since we are such a military-focused nation. But, then again, there have been presidents who worked hard for peace. I think of Jimmy Carter who received the Nobel Peace prize, but we got rid of him after only one term.

8] Finally, which politician would come closest to being falsely the object of every kind of insult?

The obvious retort to these questions is to shout: “Hey, you can’t expect a politician to be a saint!” That’s pretty close to shouting, “Hey you can’t expect me to be a saint!”

To which I simply reply: God does expect you to be a saint, since you are a “child of God.”

Edward Vacek SJ
Loyola University New Orleans
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