FOR ALL US SAINTS
Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18

FOCUS: On This All Saints Sunday we honor those who have gone on to glory and challenge
ourselves to live as the saints we were created to be.

This is one of those odd Sundays which offers two sets of lectionary readings. There is the reading from the tradition we usually use with is called the semi-continuous lectionary, so called because it attempts to provide continuity within books, particularly the gospels. But this is All Saints Sunday and there is also a set of texts chosen specifically to relate to this special day. I chose to mix it up, for I found things in both sets of scriptures which were particularly appropriate as we gather today.

At first blush it is hard to discern what the text we have read from Ruth has to do with All Saints Day. It is a bit of a stretch I suppose, but you should be expecting that from me by now. To connect the dots we need to consider the nature of sainthood. So what is a saint? Who would you name?

Of course there are those who have been officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church. Some of my favorites are Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola. But we are not Roman Catholic, we are protestant and we don’t have any saints, right? Actually wrong. Not only do we have saints, we have vastly more than our Roman sisters and brothers. You are sitting in a room full of them at this very moment. Look around you. You might spot a couple of folks who are, in your estimation, rather saintly. But I am pretty certain that if you ask their spouses or children or parents to confirm your suspicions you would get at least a chuckle if now an outright guffaw! But that doesn’t disqualify them from sainthood. More about that later.

Many of you know that I like a lot of things which come out of the Roman Catholic tradition. There are many very godly Catholic people, and I really like the freshness and authenticity I see in Pope Francis. I like liturgy and tradition. But I do have a couple of bones to pick with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers over their commandeering of a couple of really good words. You may have noticed that I have been referring this morning either to the Roman Church or to the Roman Catholic Church. That is by design, for the word catholic is not the exclusive domain of that one large family of faith. To be sure those folks are all catholic, but so are we and so are the Baptists, the Assembly of God folk, those worshipping across the street in the Korean church. As we have discussed before, and as we make clear in the bulletin whenever we use the Apostle’s Creed, the word “catholic” is not a term of exclusivity, rather it is the ultimate inclusive word. When we speak of our belief in the Holy Catholic Church in the creed, we are affirming our belief in that universal, all-inclusive class of all who claim the name of Jesus Christ and who seek to follow him.

There is a similar problem of appropriation by the Roman church when it comes to the matter of sainthood. According to the ever helpful website dummies.com, which I discovered for the first time this week, sainthood in the Roman church is reserved for those deceased folk who have performed two verifiable miracles, who lived exemplary lifes of goodness and virtue worthy of imitation and who either died a heroic death, or underwent a major conversion of heart where a previous immoral life was abandoned and replaced by one of outstanding holiness. Actually the process is even more complicated than that definition makes clear, and it requires the blessing of the pope, but you get the point.

In scripture we discover that sainthood, despite how it is defined in one tradition, is neither uncommon nor reserved for those who have received a special blessing from the church hierarchy. In the New Testament we discover that saints are simply the church folks, all the church folks. Timothy George, the dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University writes ***“‘Saints’" in the New Testament refers to baptized believers in a local congregation, such as the saints at Corinth, or Ephesus, or Colossae. Some of these believers were far from saintly in their behavior, but they were holy by virtue of their participation in Christ. The New Testament also recognizes "a great cloud of witnesses" made up of men and women of faith who surround us as we walk the path of faith. Each community within the Christian tradition has its own "saints" in this sense.***

Last evening and yesterday afternoon there were little goblins, lots of superhero’s and innumerable little critters running around on All Hallows Eve. But today is about all the saints. I am eternally grateful for the protestant understanding of sainthood, for the understanding that this morning there are ordinary looking saints all over the place. I am humbled by the reminder that we need not despair as we confront the uncomfortable truth that we twenty-first century saints are nowhere near perfection. The truth is that neither were those folks who have been honored with the title by the Roman Church. Read about the lives of saints like Francis of Assisi sometime.

As I reread the story of Ruth and Naomi I recognized in their story the marks of ordinary sainthood. First there was genuine commitment based on relationship. Ruth was a Moabite, she had most likely never been to Judah. Her blood relatives were all there in Moab, across the Jordan River in a fertile and productive land. That is how she came to be married to a fellow from Bethlehem. His family had fled drought and famine and had come to know bounty in the fertile hills to the east. But when her husband died and his mother prepared to return to Judea, Ruth gave no thought to staying behind in her native land. We don’t know the whole story, are not told why Ruth chose to leave her mother behind and to go with Naomi. But we can surmise that there was a very special and deep relationship that transcended bloodlines. We find in their relationship heartfelt respect, deep admiration and an inescapable sense of respect and duty. Real saints are people of commitment and mutual respect.

We also see modeled in the relationship between these two women a genuine faith in God. Most likely Ruth had grown up surrounded by those who worshipped numerous idols and many different so called gods. But she had experienced the presence of the one true God as she integrated into this Judean family. She had seen in the lives of her husband and his family the wonder of lives committed to a single God, committed to faithfulness and service. So Ruth spoke those wonderful words of commitment, commitment to both her mother in law and to YHWH, the God of Naomi’s homeland. ***“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall become my people, and your God my God.”***  So the two women arrived in Naomi’s homeland. Like Job, Naomi struggled as she dealt with all she had endured. When she arrived back in the Judea she even suggested that her name be changed to Mara, the Hebrew word for bitter. But she never gave up on God, nor did Ruth. Real saints keep the faith no matter what may come in their lives.

We find in the lives of real ordinary saints an honest faith which refuses to deny that there are difficulties and unanswered questions. Such faith is able to look to the future, trusting that God will be there, no matter what may come and that God will bring about God’s will in God’s own perfect timing. If you read the rest of the story you will find that Ruth finds happiness and a new life with a new husband, Boaz, a kinsman of her mother in law. Ruth and Boaz have a son and they name him Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse and Jesse became the father of David. We New Testament people know that the lineage of Ruth and Boaz didn’t end with David, it lead back to Bethlehem, Naomi’s home town, and to a son of Mary and Joseph whose sacrificial life we remember this morning in the sacred rite of Holy Communion.

In ourresponsive reading we read these words from David, the Psalmist, that great grandson of Ruth and Boaz, ***“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. They will receive blessing from the Lord, and vindication from the God of their salvation****.****”*** A couple of saints named Naomi and Ruth now stand along with all the saints of old on that eternal hill, not because they were given special recognition by some church official, not because they were perfect, not because they were credited with performing any miracles, but because they remained faithful. Just ordinary saints, doing ordinary saint stuff with extraordinary faith.

This week I thought a good deal about some of the saints I have encountered over these last 65 years. Saints who will be waiting for me when I climb that celestial hill. I remembered Sunday School teachers like Roy and Bebe Costner at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church in Birmingham. I remembered Dr. Karen Joines who taught me religion and philosophy in college. I remembered Earl and Jane Martin who made me feel at home for two years at the Baptist Seminary in Arusha Tanzania. Then I began think of those I have had the privilege of sending on their way home over the past fifteen years, especially some who have been gone for some time now.

I remembered Fred Exley who would come over each Sunday and turn on the heat or the air so the sanctuary would be comfortable come worship time. I remembered how terrified I was only a few weeks after coming here when I borrowed his snapper lawn mower to cut the grass at the church only to have something fall apart while using it. I remembered how gracious Fred was when I timidly called to tell him my dilemma. I remembered Blanche Juergens. There was no mistaking that she was from above the Mason Dixon Line, both her accent and her personality made that clear. She could be more than a bit intimidating, but she also had a heart of gold. I still miss getting her fudge during the holiday season. There are so many other saints who come to mind, Carolyn Barnes, Pat Kesler, Cinda and Keith Chrisman, Martha Brown, saints all.

Imperfect, loveable, sometimes infuriating saints just like all the saints I look out on this morning. We are saints on a journey, a journey home. We do not travel alone. We go hand in hand, accompanied by the love and grace of God and bound together the Holy Spirit. And one day we will join those who have gone before us and we will experience that which is far greater than we could ever imagine. We will experience what John had revealed to him as he was in prison on Patmos.

John wrote: ***“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "All is done.”***

On this day when we are inclined to think of those saints whose membership is now and forever in what is sometimes called the church triumphant we are reminded by John the Revelator that indeed we are all but passing through this old world. We find words of hope and an assurance that no matter what trials or hardships we might endure in the meantime, we will one day join all the saints who have gone before us, we will see God face to face and we will be more fully whole than we have ever been here below. But in the meantime we have a mission and a calling. We are to be those imperfect saints who remember the words of our savior when he spoke in the gospel text for this week of the fundamental makings of the saintly life.

Having been asked which commandment was most important Jesus replied without hesitation. ***“ “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’;and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”***

Brothers and sisters, fellow saints on this remarkable journey, we are not far from the kingdom of God. In his writing about sainthood, Timothy George spoke of participation in Christ. He explained that the word in Greek was “communio”. So we come now to that holy time in our service when we saints are invited to participate in Christ as we drink unfermented wine and eat unleavened bread. As we come may we remember those saints who have proceeded us into the perfect realm, may we give thanks for the saints who accompany us to the table and may we come prepared to truly participate in our Lord as we commit to loving service in his name. For your sake, for the sake of a people starving for real love and for the sake of the one whose very name is Love, let it be so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.