

Ordinary Saints
Brookfield Congregational Church
October 31, 2010
Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-23

Once, there stood a big, old walnut tree just inside the cemetery fence in a small Midwestern town. One Halloween afternoon, two boys stopped to fill a bucket with nuts. Then they sat down, out of sight behind the fence, and began dividing the nuts between them.

"There's one for you and one for me. One for you, one for me," said one boy.

A couple of the nuts dropped and rolled down toward the fence.

About that time, another boy came riding down the road on his bicycle. As he passed the cemetery, he thought he heard voices coming from inside the fence.

He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me."

Terrified, he jumped back on his bike and rode off. Just around the bend he met an old man with a cane, hobbling along.

"Come here quick," said the boy, "you won't believe what I heard! Satan and God are down at the cemetery dividing up souls."

The old man said, "You must be crazy!" But the boy convinced the man to accompany him back to the cemetery.

Standing by the fence they heard, "One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me..." The old man whispered, "Boy, you've been telling the truth. Let's see if we can see them!"

Shaking with fear, they peered through the fence, yet were still unable to see anything. The old man and the boy gripped the wrought iron bars of the fence tighter and tighter as they tried to get a glimpse of God and the Devil.

At last they heard, "One for you, one for me. That's all here. Now let's go collect those two nuts by the fence and we'll be done."

They say the old man made it back to town a full five minutes ahead of the boy on the bike.

Today is Halloween, of course, and we all know what Halloween is: a day for costumes and trick or treat and spooky stories and silly Halloween jokes. But Halloween is also "All Hallows Eve"—the day before All Hallows Day, otherwise known as All Saints Day.

We Protestants might feel slightly squeamish about a day that's devoted to the celebration of saints. That's because we may think of "saints" as those people recognized by the Catholic and

Orthodox Churches for being superhumanly virtuous miracle workers. These saints are not worshipped, but the faithful pray to them for help. Saint Francis and Saint Patrick are two such saints that come quickly to mind.

Most of us Protestants do not venerate saints in the same way as Catholic and Orthodox believers, but we do have our own examples of people who led such exemplary lives of faith that we could call them Protestant saints. One such person was a nineteenth century Congregational woman named Fidelity Fiske.

Born in 1816 in Massachusetts, Fidelity was a precocious child, reading Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* and Timothy Dwight's *Theology* by the time she was eight years old.

When she came of age, she longed for a college education. But the opportunity was not available until 1837 when another Congregational woman, Mary Lyon, opened Mount Holyoke Seminary for Women in Amherst, Massachusetts.

In 1839, Fidelity entered the seminary. Her education was interrupted when she contracted typhoid fever, along with 40 other students. Unlike nine of those students, Fidelity survived, but her health was never robust after that time. Still, she was able to return to school and upon completing her degree, she became a full time instructor at Mount Holyoke.

Fidelity's life took a drastic turn when she read a book by Justin Perkins, a missionary who was on furlough from service in Persia—modern day Iran. He described the needs of the Persian people in such gripping detail that when a call went out for a missionary to Persia, Fidelity felt compelled to answer it.

She wrote to her family to ask their opinion of the idea. Citing her poor health, her family discouraged her. They also argued that moving to a foreign country as a single woman would be quite scandalous. In deference to their advice, Fidelity reluctantly turned down the post.

The post was offered to another woman, but that woman's family also discouraged her. At this point, Fidelity was asked to reconsider. Convinced she was being called by God, Fidelity accepted.

In June of 1843 Fidelity arrived in Persia. She entered a hostile, male-dominated culture that had little esteem for women and saw no value in educating female children. Given such a world, one of the first Persian phrases Fidelity learned was "give me your daughters."

Fidelity spent fifteen years in Persia assuring women of their value and working to make their lives less harsh. She convinced families to let her educate their young daughters in her boarding school instead of abandoning them or selling them into slavery. She became the girls' protector as well as their teacher.

Fidelity was well-loved by the women and girls she served. Once, while attending a lengthy church service, she grew fatigued. One of the Persian women told Fidelity, "Lean on me." Fidelity resisted, but the woman said, "If you love me, lean on me." At that moment, Fidelity felt that Jesus was telling her, "if you love me, lean on me," and she leaned gratefully against the woman for the remainder of the service.

After 15 years, Fidelia's struggle with poor health forced her return to America. She spent the remaining five years of her life teaching at Mount Holyoke, writing, and speaking throughout New England to raise awareness of God's work remaining to be done in Persia.

On her deathbed, Fidelia heard a hymn that sang of "eternal rest." She told those around her that she didn't much care for the idea of heaven as a place of rest. She much preferred to think she would still have work to do.

After Fidelia's death at the age of 48, one of her admirers said of her, "She seemed to me the nearest approach I ever saw, in man or woman, to my ideal of our blessed Savior as he appeared on earth."

So you see, on All Saints Day, we Protestants can celebrate our own pantheon of saints, people like Fidelia Fiske, who exemplify saintly service and faithfulness. Although we would probably not think to pray to them, we can comfortably admire these remarkable and heroic figures as Protestant saints.

And that's the problem—because we are called not to admire these saintly figures but to imitate them. For by virtue of our baptism, we are set aside as God's own people, God's blessed holy ones.

This is the meaning of Paul's letter to the Ephesians from which we read this morning. He refers to the members of the church at Ephesus as "God's own people," and talks about their inheritance as saints. Saints, then, are those who are set apart as God's own people. But what does that mean really?

In the Gospel reading from Luke for All Saints Day, Jesus identifies what it means to be God's own people in stunning and even awful words. Talking directly to his disciples, Jesus tells them they are blessed to be poor, hungry, weeping, and hated.

This direct and uncompromising language may make the hearer cry out, "Who me?"

Surely, Jesus is talking only to his most ardent followers, the disciples, the saints like St. Peter and St. Paul. Perhaps he's speaking to remarkable women like Fidelia who risked her life, health and reputation to bring new dignity to the women and girls of Persia—against all odds in a violent, male-dominated culture. Surely, he's not talking to us ordinary folk sitting in church on a Sunday morning!

But if we read down the page just a short distance, we come to these words, "you that listen." Jesus is speaking not only to his closest followers, but also to the crowds gathered on the plain to hear him and to you and me, reading his words some 2000 years later. He is speaking to anyone who listens.

Jesus' words challenge us because his notion of blessing is so different from our own. We look at our lives of relative abundance, comfortable homes, sufficient food, attractive clothes, and we feel blessed. Where is the blessing in poverty and privation?

Jesus' words remind us that we will die, and we will not be able to take our comfortable lives with us. When we face our judgment, we will be poor indeed if we measure our whole wealth in terms of our material goods.

That doesn't mean that we must all be hungry, cold and miserable in this life to be counted among God's saints. There is no inherent virtue in poverty.

But Jesus is reminding us, as he does elsewhere in scripture, that we are always in danger of our possessions possessing us, and when we become too attached, we become incapable of blessing others by sharing our wealth and our work to help bring about God's reign of mercy and justice.

Being a saint does not mean we must be abjectly poor. It also does not mean we must be perfect. Those closest followers, those disciples who sat nearest to him as he delivered his sermon, were destined to show their human frailty in numerous ways.

They would squabble among themselves about who should be Jesus' right-hand man. On the day of his death, they would scatter in fear, denying they even knew him. After his death, they would argue about whether anyone other than Jews could be Christian.

Sainthood is not about achieving perfect goodness. There are no perfect people. There are only ordinary human beings who sometimes get it right and sometimes manage to overcome their own limitations to do amazing things for God with God's amazing help.

As we celebrate All Saints Day today, we may think of some of those ordinary saints we know. On All Saints Day, we particularly recognize those who are no longer among us.

So I think today of Ned Kurtz, an ordinary mortal whose name came up again and again during our recent Meet and Greet sessions. Ned was just an ordinary guy, but he helped grow God's kingdom in this very place by extending extraordinary welcome to newcomers, making them feel at home here.

And I think of those six intrepid souls who some 55 years ago thought that the new city of Brookfield needed a Congregational Church. Here is the voice of Claire Akemann, one of those six saints who dared to dream this church into existence and the last one still among us. Listen as I read Claire's words:

It was the mid 1950's and six young parents decided they wanted a local [Congregational] Sunday school for their children to attend. It was before the merger of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical Reformed groups so sending them to Trinity, just up the road from us was not an option. We met together to get some ideas on how to get started. That simple idea was to change our lives in ways we could not imagine.

Suddenly, as if by a stroke of God, the formation of a new church became the central part of our lives, almost nothing else mattered. Although we had all been part of the three churches we came from, we were now the future of a wonderful vision, each taking on responsibility for tasks we had left up to others to do. We were kindergarteners in a post-college world. Those were heady days, filled with meetings, prayers and expectations.

My husband, Dave, and I considered the founding of Brookfield Congregational Church the greatest accomplishment of our lives. To see it today, with a lovely building, active programs and a committed membership makes being a charter member a truly proud accomplishment. I look back on those days with fond memories and hope that those who have taken our places can find the same love and joy that we six found in establishing Brookfield Congregational Church.

I doubt that Claire would claim sainthood for herself or the five other people who first thought of forming this church. But we are listening to one of God's saints when we hear Claire talk about being so touched by God that establishing God's church became the central mission of their lives.

I doubt that the 60-some souls who signed on as charter members considered themselves saints—people like Helen Ring and John and Louise Hatton, charter members who are still with us today—and like Barb Kurtz, one of the youngest charter members of the new church known as Brookfield Congregational. They were just ordinary people—called to the extraordinary task of creating a new church.

Hear now Barb Kurtz's witness to that extraordinary time: *(Available in the audio file for this sermon.)*

In the 55 years since Barb helped break ground for this building, this church has served as a beacon of hope for refugees, for the hungry and homeless here and in foreign lands. It has met to worship God and to educate its sons and daughters to be God's people.

To be a saint does not mean to be perfect or heroic, it means only to be blessed as one of God's own people by being a blessing to those around us. As members of God's church, we are all ordinary saints, called to do God's work. It is that simple and that amazing.