

November 7, 2004

"Secret Saints"

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17; Luke 20:27-40

Preached by Rev. Dr. Richard E. Nye

#### SAINTS WE KNOW ABOUT

As we began our worship this morning we sang:

For all the saints who from their labors rest,  
who thee by faith before the world confessed,  
thy name O Jesus, be forever blest.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!

Also, moments ago we remembered those members of our church family who have left the communion of this life, entering into that inscrutable mystery of life beyond life. I love the imagery suggested by these words from our tradition – "they have left the church militant and entered the church triumphant."

Have you noticed how comfortable we are in calling these dear friends and loved ones of the years, "saints?" As we mourn them and remember them their imperfections become endearing, their failures ignored and their good qualities are often celebrated. I am grateful for what has become customary in funeral and memorial services these days: family members and friends who tell stories, remember gratefully and affirm an honest love for the one who has simply "gone before us."

Some Sunday morning when we have nothing else to do, perhaps I will invite us to leaf through our Bibles together, looking at passages that give hints of promise about the mystery into which our loved ones have gone. As a kind of teaser to that possibility I invite you to look again at this morning's reading from Luke's Gospel.

Here we find some religious leaders from one of the denominations of Judaism trying to trick Jesus into making an embarrassing or heretical statement. You know religious people can be difficult – critical, judgmental, unkind, devious quick to anger – I'm glad no one but my wife was around Saturday morning at about 3 o'clock when the phone rang. We both lurched out of bed only to hear that it was a wrong number. On the way back to bed I ran into the door and bumped my head hard. You would not have been proud of the temperament of this would-be religious leader, I confess.

So, a group of religious leaders, Sadducees, asked, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Jesus' response is so engaging! He suggests in his response that the categories of this life are inadequate for thinking about life in the age to come. There will be no marriage, but all will be like "angels" and "children of God." Then Jesus quotes God's own self from the story of the burning bush. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and the God of Jacob," the Lord tells Moses, "and from this Jesus draws conclusions: since God is the God of the living, and since God is also the God of the patriarchs, then the patriarchs must be alive in God." (Roberta Bondi, "Christian Century," 11/2/04)

I agree with Roberta Bondi that Jesus is talking here about something we might call the "communion of the saints." A communal experience in that hoped for, prayed for fulfillment of all human longings – a life beyond life, more wondrous than anything our human imaginations might be capable of entertaining.

Sometimes I have attempted to reach out toward that other age into which loved ones have gone. I was encouraged in this activity of spirit by Lewis Dunnington, long-time pastor of the Methodist Church in Iowa City, IA. Forty years ago I spent several days with a group of young clergy led by the newly retired Dunnington. Among many things he shared in our time with him was a pastoral discipline of keeping in touch with the memories of those who had been part of the church in Iowa City and had left for communion with the church beyond. He said he often went very early on Sunday mornings into the sanctuary. For long minutes he would prowl around remembering those who would be physically absent that day because of death. He would remember where they sat during worship, how they looked, even what they often wore. Then he would pray with that beloved congregation of departed saints and preach to them the sermon he had prepared for that day. It was the work of prayerful imagination, he said. And it was an enriching practice of his ministry.

Perhaps we could populate our sanctuary with those whom we have named this morning and those who often sat next to us or across the way or above us in the balcony. These are saints we know about, for whom we give heartfelt gratefulness

#### SECRET SAINTS

Now I invite you to think with me about a society of people I am calling "Secret Saints." This secret organization is so secret that even those who are members often, usually in fact, don't even know they belong. These are like those the Apostle Paul speaks of in our reading this day from II Thessalonians: "But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved of the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits..." (Ch. 2: 13)

How did you get there this morning? I don't mean did you drive or were driven or walk? I mean, how is it that you got up, got ready and walked into this blest place and space? Some of you are here because it is a holy habit, a commitment you have made and kept. Others have come this morning because of an invitation. Still others of you have come out of some persistent longing or curiosity, perhaps. I would claim that whatever the human reason underlying it is the deeper truth that you are here because God's Spirit has nudged, pulled, blest – chosen you and called you into the community of this people.

I remember some years ago one father who told me that the previous Sunday his son on the way home from church blurted out, "I know one thing. Rev. Nye told a lie this morning." "Why, what do you mean," asked the father? "Well," continued little Jimmy Wilson, "Rev. Nye said God called each of us to be at church today. God didn't call me! You guys made me get up and go."

My dear friends, young and older, I have a growing conviction about the hand of God in the real comings and goings of our lives. I am appropriately humble when it come to explaining the details of how God is present but the fact of God's guiding, encouraging presence is a quiet conviction of my heart and experience.

Though Pam and I have only been among you a short time, Colonial brothers and sisters, we are a living witness to the sure and certain expressions of sainthood that betray your identity.

Your prayerfulness gives you away. Whether it is staff together or meetings of elected leaders or study or fellowship groups or breakfast, lunch or dinner in a restaurant there is a natural reflex to prayerful sharing.

Your kindness reveals your association as God's beloved Saints. Pam and I have watched the way you meet and greet one another. Mary Cosby, of the Church of Our Savior in Washington D.C., tells about her dear mother, one of the saints of a vital historic church in New England. A new Senior Minister was preparing to preach his first sermon in the eminent pulpit of that church. He wisely sought out several saints of that place before that first Sunday, asking for their counsel. Mary Cosby's mother said something like this: "Young man, remember that every person you look at, every pair of eyes you see, is sitting beside a pool of tears." I remember someone else saying, "Be kind to everyone you meet. He or she is having a hard time, too."

Well, dear Colonial saints I have been observing and experiencing an unusual kindness which you demonstrate.

You betray your membership in that secret society of saints by your concern for others, near and far. I am very excited about two Sundays from today when we will hear from Joyce, Mike and Jeff about their mission trip to India and Sri Lanka. The connections with a variety of agencies of Christ-like compassion is a thrilling story of a people who qualify for sainthood.

Finally, your faithfulness... Ah, dear friends I am so proud of you and grateful, too. Colonial has been through years of change. It is not easy to move from the pastoral leadership of more than thirty years, a changing society and be surrounded by unusually strong churches. You know Colonial exists in the Bermuda Triangle of churches – Grace, Wooddale and Christ Presbyterian. I rejoice, I give thanks to God for the effectiveness of these churches. And I sense that on the rock of your faithfulness – the faithfulness of you who are here, God is going to move with you into new avenues of service and ministry.

Forgive me if I have blown your cover. Your sainthood is no longer a secret. Perhaps we ought to begin identifying one another for who we are. Saint Mary, Martha, Jeff and Tim...Saint Charles and Fran...Saint Bill and Emily and Keith...Saint Ivy and Gary and David...Beloved of the Lord, chosen and called, blest and gathered...

Brother and sister saints of God, I commend you and salute you and give thanks that the Nyes have been called to share the promise of this day and the tomorrows which God is preparing for you.

#### THE LORD'S SUPPER

We move now to share the Lord's Supper. This day perhaps you will let the broken bread and the cup represent the Servant God whom we know in Christ. And in eating and drinking together, saints above and saints below, we reveal our reluctant willingness to let God be expressed in and through us – secret saints that we sometime are and sometimes can only want to be.