

Saints in the making

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

For well over a thousand years November 1, or All Saints Day, has been marked in red on the Christian calendar. The meaning behind the celebration speaks to our time, especially when distinguishing between saints and celebrities, and remembering Karl Barth's word about reading the Bible with the daily newspaper in hand. The latter tells of celebrities, the former offers saints.

We always have celebrities and heros/heroines with us. Too much with us sometimes, as the glare of publicity reveals more human frailties than media hype can cover up. I live in the Chicago area, where Michael Jordan has been rightly touted as the best at basketball on earth. But all the ruckus about the crumbling Bulls empire makes celebrity status a shaky business.

Celebrities distance themselves from us by their fame, whether it lasts 15 minutes or a lifetime. But saints share our common ground and open a place in the circle of forgiven sinners.

This is the standard New Testament designation for saints: the forgiven who know it, act upon it and live by grace without angling for stained-glass-window status. The late William Stringfellow described saints as "those men and women who relish the event of life as a gift and who realize that the only way to honor such a gift is to give it away."

The marvel is that we imperfect and deeply flawed human beings can be called by a God who alone is holy. From God's blinding, unapproachable holiness, God has come in the One who is like us in all ways except sin. In Jesus Christ, crucified and risen for the world, saints are in the making--past, present and ongoing. It's not hype that sanctifies. The gospel is the power whereby the Spirit of God makes people not just nice but new in heart, word and deed.

The Gospel from Luke 6 offers Jesus' template of what that difference looks like as his regal sway takes hold. Called the Sermon on the Plain, it is a third shorter than the better-known Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel. It contains the "Woe to you" admonitions as well as the "Blessed are you" beatitudes. Here Jesus

addresses his followers-who-would-be-saints. It is not a template for how society works. It is the pattern of life where saints are in the making.

The details of Luke's setting are significant. Jesus had come down from the hills where he was praying. On the plain a great crowd of disciples and a greater crowd of sick and troubled people surrounded him. Picture desperate people jostling, pushing, begging, clamoring, demanding, all reaching for his touch of healing.

It is a sight more alarming than inspiring. There is nothing safe and tidy about people grasping for their only hope to be rid of the pain, the paralysis or the weakness once and for all. Taking his place in the midst of that brawling crowd, Jesus "looked up" at the disciples. Apparently they were bystanders, as I would have been too. They were not with Jesus, kneeling down in the wretched thick of it, but off to the side as onlookers.

Saints are sideline onlookers who are moved to "come down" with Jesus to where the needs are raw and the realities untidy. Saints are not always serene, dauntless and inexhaustible. But those pronounced blessed by Jesus are able to stay with him in the thick of it because that is where he is continually found. The saintly ones remember that the kingdom belongs to the impoverished before God, who hunger for his fullness and weep when his righteousness is spurned. The harsh kickback of reviling and defaming goes with the territory; saints are tough-skinned and can't be taken completely off guard.

Saints are given a clarity about what passes for the good life but is phony at the core. They can hear Jesus' pronouncement on those who would appear to have anything but woes: "you who are rich . . . who are full now . . . who laugh now . . . who are well spoken of by all." Why woes on these? The good life portrayed here is detached from its foundation in God. These ideals of life have become idols, ends in themselves which finally bring not blessing but blight. Thus saints are given the backbone to warn with woes as well as uplift with blessings.

God's people long for a closer look at great souls from the past and the enduring example of their lives. The church must not suffer the amnesia that withholds that treasure. I have seen that interest come alive as I lead lay retreats in which people meet Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Clement of Alexandria, Teresa of Ávila, Martin Luther, C. F. Beyers Naudé, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others. They keep coming back for more.

Not to be missed and much closer at hand are the saints of the rank and file of daily life. See them teaching in classrooms of public high schools in our cities. See them in hospital emergency rooms, serving with skill and embracing with compassion someone who has just learned that a spouse of 60 years has died on an operating room table. See them in retirement homes, speaking to the fragile ones who sit, mute and staring, in the wheelchair line in the hallway. See them in high school kids who tutor youngsters or rehab slum houses. See them in auto repair shops where customers receive an honest job at an honest price.

And, *Deo gratias*, see a saint in the face of a forgiven sinner who meets you in the mirror.