

All Saints Sunday  
November 5, 2017  
Rev. 7:9-17; 1 Jn. 3:1-3; Matt. 5:1-12

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## Saints Among Us

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every year we get to remember the saints. It's a great honor to hear the names of our beloved departed read during the prayers, each marked by a chime.

As we observe this sacred and moving tradition this morning, it behooves us to consider what it means to call these people saints. What is a saint? What's it all about?

As I reflected on this question, for some reason my mind turned to Cindee Kerns. Cindee and her husband own the bioshelter just outside of Anchorage, Alaska. It was one of our primary destinations during the renewal time this summer. We visited with her in mid July. It was about 70 degrees; who knew?!

Cindee is the only permaculture teacher in Alaska. And it just so happens that she and her Presbyterian bishop husband purchased the only bioshelter in the state. A bioshelter is a solar greenhouse managed as an indoor ecosystem. It was constructed from eco-friendly and sustainable materials as a government-funded experiment, with a view to building them for villages in Alaska. It has a 42 foot solarium in the front, naturally warmed by the midnight sun and the ground's thermal mass. It is complete with wetlands, an inside koi pond, a small brook, and a waterfall. It is set into the side of a mountain, which helps with climate control. Rainwater is collected on the roof for use in the house, the new greenhouse, and the rooftop garden. It's all recycled to the extent that only 2 gallons are used each day per person—less than a simple flush in most homes and far below the average 75 gallons per person per day in the U.S. The toilets are designed for composting.

If you're wondering, the koi aren't simply ornamental. If they die, the Kerns know to stop using the water immediately. They then check their complex water treatments systems and try to figure out what's wrong. Fortunately that doesn't happen much, and the systems are really cool.

The bioshelter was built in 1985 and was recognized for its commitment to earth-friendly practices with the 1987 Energy Innovation Award from the U.S. Department of Energy. It recycles all of its water and all of its waste. Unfortunately the cost came in \$5000 over budget, and the government decided not to continue funding. It seems pretty odd, since the cost was close to \$400,000. The Kerns ended up with it at a significant loss to the government. Go figure.

Cindee is the house engineer, since her husband travels so much. She is always inventing something when the systems break down. And she's always building something new. I could relate. Her confidence arises from her time as a junior high school English teacher; she was also a sponsor for the science fair.

She built a greenhouse to grow tomatoes, and a few peppers. Tomatoes are so valuable in Alaska, she said, that she barter for things with her salsa. She even got a neighbor to bring in his portable sawmill to mill trees for her—for a few jars of salsa.

On a few occasions, Cindee has had to deal with bears. One day she came downstairs to see a black bear in the house. Instead of panicking, she thought, "What would I do if I were a bear." She raised her arms, made herself as big as she could, and made as much noise as she could. She chased that bear half way down the mountain. As she said, "I didn't want it coming back."

Not only is Cindee the only permaculture teacher in Alaska, she lives what she teaches. Her goal is to become 75 percent locally reliant. This in a state that imports a full 95 percent of its goods. She even travels to a nearby riverbed to get the clay she uses for construction (for wattle and daub).

Cindee represents for me a saint. She struggles daily to do the right thing. Lots of troubles plague her, but she persists. She seems to fight an uphill battle in a difficult and rapidly changing part of our planet, but she does not give up. What a blessing it was to make this new friend, a saint of the church, a lover of God's good creation, and a co-worker with God in tapping into the genius of her place.

I also came across a fictional saint this week. I watched a Bill Murray movie from 2014. I decided to have a look because of the title, "St. Vincent." If you know Bill Murray, who plays the title character, you will rightly wonder greatly that he is portraying a saint in this film.

From the beginning of the movie, we see Vincent engaged in what many would consider sinful behavior—and a good deal of what most anyone would consider rude and inconsiderate. From heavy drinking, to bad language, to engaging in an illicit relationship, to gambling, to being a nasty neighbor, the story draws us into his world so that we might become curious about what possible meaning the film's title might hold.

A new family moves in next door—a single mother (played by Melissa McCarthy) and a boy named Oliver. When the mother gets stuck at work, Vincent becomes Oliver's default babysitter, with predictably troubling results for Oliver's upbringing. More to the point of the movie title, we see Oliver in parochial school, where the priest is talking about what a saint is. One of the smart kids gives the textbook definition, "Individuals who display and act out of exceptional holiness." Then the priest-teacher extends the definition: "A saint is a human being we celebrate for their commitment and dedication to other human beings, for the sacrifices that they make; for their hard work in making the world a better place for those around us and for those who will follow them."

Not bad, especially since this definition—from a Roman Catholic (and in a film!)—doesn't lean towards the usual holier-than-thou perfection that too many people associate with sainthood. He assigns the class the task of researching a person they know to see whether they fit the definition of "saint." He calls it the "Saints among us" project.

Slowly we get to see the other side of Vincent. He stands up for under-sized Oliver when he gets beaten up by bullies. He visits a woman in a nursing home and treats her with amazing tenderness. He dresses up as a doctor. She addresses him as such. He checks her pulse, calls her beautiful, and takes her laundry. We later learn it's his wife who is dying with dementia. He teaches Oliver how to protect himself. He helps a pregnant prostitute with medical insurance.

Things take a turn for the worse when Vincent has a stroke. While he recuperates, his wife dies. It's a blow that nearly does him in, and he turns back in on himself.

Meanwhile Oliver does his research on Vincent. He learns about his war record in Vietnam. He talks with the nursing home staff and finds out they like Vincent, telling him that he did his wife's laundry for eight years. "He's a nice guy," the nurse says.

"Saints among us" day arrives. Oliver started us thinking about things earlier in class when he says that he thinks the saints are too saintly.

Here's part of Oliver's presentation: "On the surface, one might think my saint is the least likely candidate for sainthood. He's not a happy person... He's grumpy, angry, mad at the world, and I'm sure full of regrets... If you did deeper, you see a man beyond his flaws...He was the son of first generation Irish immigrants. Growing up on the streets of Brooklyn, Vincent learned all the things that kids shouldn't need to know—fighting, cursing, and gambling. In 1965, as a member of the U.S. Army Fifth Regiment, Vincent was among the 450 soldiers dropped into the La Drang Valley and immediately ambushed by 2,000 enemy troops. There, he heroically saved the lives of two wounded officers...He was awarded the Bronze Star for his bravery.

"I imagine the best way I can tell you about Mr. Vincent MacKenna is to tell you what he's done for me. When me (sic) and my mom first moved here, we knew no one, and Mr. MacKenna took me in...when he didn't have to, and most likely didn't want to. But he did it anyhow, 'cause that's what saints do. We visited his wife, Sandy, of 40 years who recently passed away. Vin's done her laundry every week for the past eight years, long after she no longer recognized him. Because saints never give up.

"He taught me how to fight, how to stand my ground and be brave, how to speak up and be bold. Because saints fight for themselves and others, so that they might be heard. He taught me how to gamble, horseracing, Keno, the over and under, which is a

big reason why I'm grounded till I'm 18. But in that, I learned how to take risks and go for broke. Because in life, the odds can be stacked against you.

"Vin's cat eats gourmet cat food while Vince eats sardines. 'Cause saints make sacrifices.

"Yes, Mr. Vincent MacKenna is flawed, seriously flawed, just like all the other saints we studied. Because after all, saints are human beings, very human beings. Courage, sacrifice, compassion, humanity. These are the markings of a saint, and what makes Mr. Vincent MacKenna not so far removed from Saint William of Rochester. And with that, I'd like to present my friend and babysitter, Mr. Vincent MacKenna, for sainthood, and hereby proclaim him Saint Vincent of Sheepshead Bay."

It's a touching moment.

So, be forewarned. There be saints among us. Some are hiding behind facades of grumpiness or orneriness or just plain nastiness. But saints they are. Luther coined the phrase that may best describe saints—both those we honor who now abide in God and those whose souls still abide in flesh—"at once saint and sinner." Both righteous and sinful at the same time. Or, as the priest had it: A saint is a human being we celebrate for their commitment and dedication to other human beings, for the sacrifices that they make; for their hard work in making the world a better place for those around us and for those who will follow them.

Praise be the God who indwells us and sanctifies all that it means to be human. And praise God for the many saints among us. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.