

MAKE ME LIKE JOE!

A man in Buffalo, NY, was talking with his granddaughter once on Reformation Day (or Halloween). He said, Sarah, I wish you didn't have to go to school tomorrow so you could go to church with Grandma and me. Why are you going to church tomorrow, Grandpa, she asked. Because it's All Saints' Day, he answered. But Grandpa, she said, we're not saints, we're Lutherans.

We'd better not speculate on how many Lutherans are saints, but today is All Saints' Sunday because last Wednesday was All Saints' Day. It's a day to celebrate all those people we have known who served and praised Christ on earth and who now serve and praise him before God's eternal throne. I liked the Family Circus cartoon one year that said: Granddad doesn't have to set his clock back, he's on Eternal Standard Time. And, you know, we are all moving toward Eternal Standard Time.

For one thing, we're all getting older - have you noticed that? We're all aging, and the magazines and television talk about it a lot. Last Sunday's paper had an article with the title, An Honest Conversation about Aging. People are living longer. For more some decades now there've been more people who are 65 and older than teenagers. The fastest growing segment in our society is the 85+ age group. Some people do their aging very gracefully. I chuckled to read about the woman who was checking out retirement villages and had to fill out a questionnaire about her health and lifestyle and then give her name and address. When she got to the line that asked for her Zip, she wrote: Surprising amount, considering my age.

Something that happens as we get older is that our habits grow stronger. The passing years don't change our character much, they usually intensify it. If you're tight at 40, someone has said, you'll be stingy at 70. If you're skeptical at 50, you'll be cynical 20 years later. If you think the world is against you at 40, you'll still think so on your deathbed. In other words, as you sow, so shall you reap. That means we want to watch our habits and get off to a good start. Habit is such a powerful force in our lives. William James, the philosopher, said that 99% of our activity is automatic or habitual. Dressing and undressing, eating and drinking, saying hello and goodbye - we don't think much about them, we just do them. They become habits, and habits get hard to change. So, says the writer:
Watch your thoughts, they become words.
Watch your words, they become actions.
Watch your actions, they become habits.
Watch your habits, they become your character.
Watch your character, it becomes your destiny.
The secret of a successful life - isn't this true? - is to establish the right habits because those habits make us who we are, they determine our character and our destiny. And how this world needs people of character!

Open the gates, Isaiah writes, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. You will keep those in perfect peace whose mind is steadfast because they trust in you (26:2-3). There's a good and important habit - the peace that comes from putting your trust in the Lord.

And blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus says,
blessed are the merciful, and blessed are the pure in heart. (Mt. 5:1-12)
Those are important habits for Christians, and there are other habits
we want to develop: patience and integrity, tolerance and truthfulness,
speaking words of encouragement and using our time wisely and well.
We do well to examine our lives and see if the habits we're establishing
will take us where we want to go.

What makes a person a saint is that as we grow older we grow more Christlike.
This is the beauty of growing older as a Christian - it isn't something to be feared, growing
older, because as we grow older, as St. Paul says,
we can grow up in every way into Christ,
we can become more and more like our Master and his beatitudes.
Kurt Vonnegut, the writer, wrote an "opinion line" in USA Today
sometime ago and said that what the little people of our society need
is role models who behave decently and honorably
so that they can get on the right track.
There's a great purpose for the last decades of our life, or any decade -
aim to be a role model, a saint, for some child to meet.

Tony Campolo tells a story about a man named Joe. Joe had been
a hopeless, miserable drunk who lived around the Bowery in NYC,
but one day at a mission he got converted and then everything changed.
Joe stayed around the Bowery and the mission
and became the most caring person they'd ever had.
He would do whatever needed to be done -
scrubbing rest rooms, cleaning up after someone who got sick,
tucking men into bed who were too out of it to care for themselves -
and he did it with a soft smile on his face and with gratitude for the chance to help.
One evening when the preacher was preaching to all the people there,
one man came down the aisle and knelt to pray asking God to help him change. He kept
saying, O God, make me like Joe, make me like Joe, make me like Joe!
The preacher leaned over and said:
Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, Make me like Jesus!
The man looked up with a quizzical expression and said, Is he like Joe?
Joe he knew, Jesus he didn't yet know, but he was well on his way, having met Joe.

That's what being a saint is all about - living so much like Jesus that people can't tell where
he begins and we leave off. That's what Jesus wants for us - to live in us
in such a way that people want to be like us so that they can be more like him.
This is what is exciting about All Saints' Sunday. It is a day to celebrate
all those wonderful people we have known who have lived the life of faith,
the life of Jesus and his beatitudes, before us and who now surround God's throne
in praise, as the Book of Revelation (22:3-5) describes it. But it's also a day
to celebrate our own movement toward God's "eternal standard time."
We are forming habits, we are fashioning a character, we are shaping a destiny,
and our latter days may be even better for that than our earlier days.
Our lives can become shining examples of the life of faith and goodness
that we have found in Christ and with Christ and through Christ,
and that's exciting at any age.
In other words, God isn't finished with us saints yet.
Let's keep going, let's keep growing...up...in every way...into Christ,
who again today gives us his beautiful beatitudes, even as again today he gives us
his precious body and blood in that most wondrous gift, the holy communion.
Let's get to it.

Pastor Phil Schroeder
All Saints' Sunday - 5 November 2023
Nativity Lutheran Church - Weeki Wachee, FL