Sunday April 8, 1973

"ON BECOMING A SAINT" (No. 5 in a series)

In this sermon series on the "transcendent dimension," we've been emphasizing that there is a transcendent quality to our lives as human beings and to creation as a whole. We've explored the evidence for the renewed interest in the "spiritual" aspects of life, in the mystical and in all those things which are related to what we have been calling the transcendent. Thus we've talked about prayer and we've looked at other ways of experiencing God and the spiritual.

Last week in the sermon entitled "Testing the Spirits" we noted that it is the witness of the Bible that God's Spirit calls us to wholeness, and to seeing the world and creation whole. God's Spirit is that Spirit which draws us out of ourselves and is continually making us new.

We also said that a person or church that is filled with God's Spirit and attempting to work with that Spirit is open to new possibilities and is not a "know-it-all", but has humility. This is part of being connected to the transcendent dimension in life.

Furthermore, the more a person goes out from himself or goes beyond himself, the more the spiritual, the transcendent dimension in his life is strengthened and deepened and the more fully he or she becomes a human being in God's likeness.

All of this is to say that there should be something about the Christian person, about the person who is "spiritual," which makes that person different. He or she should have some qualities that are something "extra" because of his or her faith.

In other words, experiencing and being connected to the transcendent dimension should make a difference in a person's life. That's what Jesus was getting at in the sermon on the Mount and what the Apostle Paul was getting at in his first letter to the Church at Corinth.

Thus Jesus begins many of his statements in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said to the men of old," and he quotes the old way, but then goes on to say--"But I say to you!" In other words, here is the "new" way!

Or listen again to the Apostle Paul. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." In other words, if a person has all kinds of ecstatic spiritual or pentecostal experiences, but has not love, so what! says Paul. It's empty, it means nothing!

I think all of us know this and all of us really want to become different and better persons. We want at least to be on the road to becoming " saints, " persons who have that something "extra."

This morning then, we want to attempt to describe some of the qualities of a Christian "saint," and some of the ways we can go about becoming a "saint."

First of all, we need to note that very few persons, if any, become a "saint" overnight or quickly. And we are always in the process of "becoming," rather than having arrived.

Jesus knew this and had to fight and overcome temptation throughout his life. Before he began his public ministry, he spent at least 40 days in meditation and preparation, and the Bible speaks of his major temptations during this period. After he began his public ministry, he continued his discipline of regular prayer and devotion.

In our time the word "discipline" is usually associated with harsh methods of training enforced by punishment. But the word simply means 'learning.' Normally, important changes do not take place suddenly in human life. They take time and the more fundamental they are, the longer time they take. The persons who become great athletes do not do so overnight. It takes training, training, and then more training.

The Christian life, with its demand for self-giving love and for continual growth in likeness to Christ, lays a fundamental and difficult demand upon those who embark upon it. Saints who have spent a lifetime in learning, growing and developing, still bemoan their lack of proficiency in following the Christian way. It is true that we hear of sudden conversions, but we usually find that these have been preparing over a considerable time in the minds of the people concerned; and more than this, such people do not attain to complete and mature Christian character the moment after conversion.

There are no short-cuts to saintliness. All kinds of obstructions have to be surmounted. There are unloving passions, which may be difficult to control. There are self-regarding and self-indulgent habits, sometimes built up over years and firmly entrenched. Even if we begin to overcome these obstacles, there is a long way to go before we begin to grasp in an affirmative sense the amazing height and breadth and length and depth of the love to which Christians are called.

Whenever you feel you've made it, check your behavior against that described or called for in the sermon on the mount.

In one of his fullest and clearest statements on this subject of training or discipline, the Apostle Paul contrasts what he calls the 'works of the flesh,' with the 'fruits of the 'Spirit.' The works of the flesh--he mentions, among others, impurity, envy, jealousy, selfishness--are barriers to the Christian life, indeed, to any decent human existence. Yet they seem to come naturally to us. They have been rife in human society at all times, and they are in evidence today.

Only so far as they can be overcome can there be growth toward that other set of qualities Paul mentions--qualities such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These he calls fruits of the Spirit, for they are to be learned by that immersion in God which we call worship and which allows God's Spirit to operate in human lives and to transform them.

Paul states a kind of rule of life--'Whatever a person sows, that will he also reap. The communing with God in Christ is like a sowing. It is part of the process of maturing in which sinful tendencies are weakened and uprooted while the fruits of the Spirit manifest themselves more and more.

But what are some of the other attributes of a saintly or spiritual person? How do these express themselves in a person's behavior and attitudes?

1. First, a person who is becoming a saint has a sense of continuity with the past. He or she knows that we have links with all human beings, with the Egyptians and the Chinese and the Jews and the Greeks and everyone else. The saintly people are also aware that we can learn from the past and from other disciplines as well.

Recently, I heard of a boy who was working in a garage with his father and this boy was complaining. He said, "I don't owe the world a thing. I didn't ask to be born." Well, it's true that nobody asks to be born, but it does not automatically follow that we don't owe the world anything. We have a tremendous debt to the past; to those who have gone before us and to God.

The boy in the garage had never taken a good look around him. Everything he enjoys doing is a free gift from the past. His tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself--all were invented or developed or fortified by his ancestors. How many of us could survive at all without this tremendous inheritance we accept so easily and sometimes so thoughtlessly?

The boy in the garage would be like a beast in the forest if it were not for better men than he; he would be unclad, unshod, ravaged by disease and riddle with misery.

The whole world is a gigantic legacy. Imagine having to start fresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, construct the alphabet and multiplication tables? Who would discover the measle's vaccine or penicillin? I could not, could you?

The saintly person recognizes his continuity with the past.

2. Secondly, the person becoming a saint, has a sense of oneness with all people that derives from an honest confrontation with self and from a loving concern for all human beings. He confronts honestly his own humanness--looks clearly into the dark night of his own soul--senses his own daily struggle towards the good. He says with Donne, "The death of each person diminishes me," knowing that the true tragedy of war is that we all are lesser persons because others are being killed. And he responds to a higher selfishness which recognizes that one person can thrive only as she or he works for a healthy society.

3. Third, the person becoming a saint is sensitively alive and open to all experiences. This openness is not an insatiable quest for the bizarre experience that will titillate even as it destroys, but an openness and an aliveness to signs, and sounds and smells--to places and people and things, to other countries, other cultures, other people, an openness that keeps him continually growing. He is an

inclusive person rather than an exclusive person.

4. Fourth, the person becoming a saint knows that he does not know it all--that he does not have a corner on the truth. He can live without the false security of quick answers and finds in doubt a push toward further inquiry. He distrusts generalizations about the people of his world and rejects pat solutions to the problems he confronts. He knows there are no easy answers to peace and many of the other problems which are in the world.

The person who is becoming a saint knows that all of our own answers and actions are compounded of good and evil and sometimes the balance is so close that only God can see the difference. He knows that there is a mystery to life, that as St. Paul said, "For now we see in a mirror dimly."

But his rejection of dogmatism does not make him irresolute. Even though all the answers are not known--about science, about government, about education, about religion, about life itself, still he is able to act, for he knows that a person defines himself by his decisions. The person becoming a saint operates with careful confidence coupled with authentic humility.

5. A person becoming a saint is a person who not only joins the church, but also joins the world. The Gospel of John tells us that "God so loved the world." And the world to which John is referring is this world with all of its problems and frustrations and joys. It is the same world in which you and I live. It is not a make-believe ideal world which is all spiritual and perfect. It is the world in which you and I and other people live and talk and laugh and cry and celebrate and suffer and buy and sell and lust and love and fight and die.

When we turn to Jesus, we see a person who lived full in the world, one who enjoyed its pleasures and wept over its failures. We see one who was with people in the joys and sorrows of life. He knew all about the world's wicked ways; he probably knew better than most of us how hypocritical and deceptive people can be; how they can be outwardly pious and at the same time inwardly pitiless. Yet at the same time, he loved people and he loved the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell: "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. . . This is what I mean by worldliness--taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, it experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith and that is what makes a human being and a Christian." I would add--that is what helps a persons on his way to becoming a saint.

6. A person who is becoming a saint has a sense of humor. He or she is able to laugh at himself, at his own self-righteousness. There are very few, if any, grim saints.

Let's see if we can sum it up. The saintly person, the spiritual person is more than just a good person. The saintly person has something extra. He has an inner depth and strength, at once stable and dynamic. The saintly person is not only good, but enables others to be good. The inner strength welling up in him overflows in his relations with others. They are like channels of power of God or the Holy Spirit.

True saints are rare, but we all meet persons who, in greater or less degree are becoming saints.

There is one characteristic which all persons becoming saints have in common. This quality or characteristic is "identification." Through some mysterious process only dimly perceived by the rest of us, they are able to identify with the full range of creation. They seem to be at home in the universe.

They can identify with the leper and the criminal; with the disfigured and the stupid; with the thief and the alien; with the coward and the heretic; with the hippy and the square; with the beast in the field and the bird in the air and the fish in the sea. To be saintly or spiritual is to comprehend the "sharingness" of creation.

Above all, this was the kind of person Jesus was. He saw the human being, God's creature in the prostitute, the cripple, the mentally ill, the child and the thief on the cross. The more we can identify with persons unlike our selves, the more we enter into sainthood. This is why

Jesus moved among the poor, the afflicted, the outcasts, the disreputable, the dregs of society. "As you have done it unto one of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me."

God calls each one of us, by connecting with the transcendent dimension to become "saints," to become human beings in God's likeness. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. Besides the description in the sermon of the attributes of saintly persons, what other characteristics would you add?

2. Should it be possible in our society to pick out the Christian person without being told? What is that something "extra" which the Christian has?

3. Think of saintly persons who have influenced your own life? Who were they and how did they influence you?

4. Who do you have trouble identifying with? What kind of people turn you off? Is it possible for you, like Jesus to identify with all kinds of persons? Why not?