
ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 3, 2013

BORN A SAINT OR TRAINED TO BE A SAINT?

Pastor Jim Dunn (up to the last paragraph, this sermon is almost like one long quote from a Max Lucado sermon in his book, *A Gentle Thunder*, pp105-111)

Revelation 7:9-17

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,

10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" **11** And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, **12** saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" **14** I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

A certain king had two sons. One day, the two sons came to their father with a question. "Is a gentleman born or trained?" "Well, what do you think?" he asked them. "I think a gentleman is born a gentleman," said one son. "I disagree," said the other. "A man becomes a gentleman by training and discipline." The king looked at his two sons and issued them a challenge. "Prove your case by presenting me with an example. I give you one week to return with proof of your opinions."

So, the two sons set out, going in different directions. The son who believed a gentleman must be trained found his proof in a tavern. He'd ordered a cup of mulled cider and was amazed at the sight of his waiter. The waiter was a cat, standing up on its hind legs, carrying the tray in its front paws. The cat wore a tiny uniform and hat and was proof that a creature could be trained to do just about anything. Then, why couldn't a man be trained to become a gentleman? He bought the cat immediately and returned to the palace.

The other son was not doing so well in his search. He could find no proof of his opinion, so he returned home empty-handed. What was worse was that he heard about his brother's walking cat. But returning to the palace through town, he saw in a store window something that made him smile. He made a purchase but told no one.

The sons arrived before the king, each holding a box. The first son said he had proof a man can be trained to become a gentleman, and he presented his cat, dressed in miniature fine clothes and handing the king a tray of chocolates. The king was stunned, the son was proud. The court of the king broke into applause. The second son stepped up and bowed before the king and without a word he opened his box, releasing several mice into the court. Instantly, the cat scampered after the mice. The cat's true nature had been revealed. Even if no other point had been made, this point was clear. A walking cat is still a cat. Put some clothes on him, teach him some manners, give him a hat, train him to walk like a gentleman, and he may appear to be changed. But present him with something his true nature cannot resist and you're faced with an undeniable truth. A walking cat is still just a cat.

It is similar with people. On this All Saints' Sunday, we ask the question, Is a person born a saint, or can a person be trained to become a saint? Well, we can be trained. Like the cat, we can change our clothes, change our habits, change our vocabulary, change our attitude, but there's one thing we cannot change: our sinful nature. So says one of the greatest saints who ever lived. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans: "I decide to do good, but I don't really do it. I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't always result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. In fact, it happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me secretly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge of me. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? (Rom. 7:18-24)

Paul is saying that no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try, no matter how much training you're given, your sinful nature is going to come out. Let a few mice cross your trail, those temptations Satan has successfully used on you before, and you lose your temper. You forget your purpose. You demand your way. You lie. You lust. You hate. You hold a grudge. You worry. You feel sorry for yourself. Your sinful nature is going to come out. Training and discipline do not change what is inside of us. New habits don't make a new person. That's not to say that training and discipline and new habits aren't good. It's to say they're not enough. Training and discipline and new habits are not enough to make us become saints.

A saint must be born. That is, a saint must be born anew, as you have been. Since you were born anew through your Baptism, you have been a saint.

Born anew? As a saint? You mean like reincarnation? Or do we mean we answered an altar call? Does it mean we had plastic surgery? Does it mean we simply stopped sinning? What does it mean to be born anew? As a saint? You aren't the first to find this hard to understand. Nicodemus asked the same question. The phrase "born anew" was first used by Jesus. He used that phrase when He was speaking one night with a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a good man.

A Pharisee like Paul. Like Paul, Nicodemus knew the Ten Commandments. Knew all the laws of God, and, like Paul, Nicodemus wanted to do what was right. By training and discipline, Nicodemus wanted to have the right kind of habits controlling his behavior. But Jesus told him that wasn't enough. "Unless one is born anew, he cannot enter the kingdom of God," Jesus told him. (John 3:3,5)

And what did Nicodemus say to that? Do you remember? He said, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Well, how is one born anew as a saint? Look at your hands. Feel your ears. Touch your lips. Who gave you these? Did you make them? No, God made them. God created you. And it was also God who made you a new creation. "If anyone belongs to Christ, he is a new creation!" (2Corinthians 5:17) Beginning at your Baptism you belonged to Christ. At your Baptism, you were created anew by God. At your Baptism, you were born anew. At your Baptism you were born anew as a saint. At your Baptism, you were given a new heart cleansed with the blood of Christ. At your Baptism, you were given new eyes to see by faith.

So, what part did you have to do in being born anew as a saint of the Lord? Well, what part did you do in your birth? Did you labor? Did you feel pain? No, it was through your mom's labor that you were born. It was through your mom's pain that you were born. And, it was through Jesus' labor that you were born anew. It was through Jesus' pain on the cross that you were born anew. It was through Jesus' blood, the giving of His life that you were born anew.

So, saints are not trained. People do not become saints. Saints are born; born anew in Baptism, not by the mere pouring out of water but by what the pouring water reminds us of: the pouring of Jesus' blood unto death to wash away your sin. That's why Paul can say in answer to his own heart-wrenching question about his sinful nature, "Is there no one who can do anything for me?": Yes, there is, he says. It's Jesus Christ, in whose name Paul was baptized. It was at that moment and not later after all of his years of service. It was at that moment of Paul's baptism, just three days after he was still arresting Christians, that Paul was born anew as St. Paul.

So also in your case, dear saint. You were born anew a saint while you were yet a sinner. So, do not think that saints do not struggle. Or that you'll never chase mice again. Or that your old desires won't come back. Or that you won't stumble. Or that your old nature won't get the best of you. Saints even as great as Paul have struggled against their sinful nature. Our sins, though, are not unforgivable, whether unintentional or deliberate. God is faithful to forgive all of our sins for Jesus' sake. In our struggle with our old sinful nature, the Lord gives us new eyes of faith to see the cross of Christ. To remember that our being born anew as saints was not through our struggle but through His. And to keep us in faith is also His struggle. "He who began a good work in you will continue that work, and He will bring it to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6) "He is faithful, and He will do it." (1Thessalonians 5:24)

Amen