

“Above and Beyond”

A Sermon by the Rev. Don Gall
All Saints Sunday
First Congregational Church UCC, Eugene, Oregon
October 31, 2021

TEXT

Luke 10:25-37

Good morning and welcome to this special celebration of All Saints Day. It was first referred to in the fourth century, was firmly established by the seventh century, and is now celebrated in churches everywhere. It is a special feast day in Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches where saints of old are venerated and often called upon for comfort, guidance, and protection. In Protestant churches like our, the focus is more often on the saints who are still living, breathing and working among us, like all of you, which reminds me of the final verse to one of my favorite hymns:

*“They lived not only in ages past,
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is filled with living saints
who choose to do God’s will.
You can meet them in school, on the road, or at sea,
in a church, on a train, in a shop, or at tea;
for the saints are folks like you and like me,
and I mean to be one, too.”*

Now, before you shrug and try to toss off the mantle of sainthood I’ve just bestowed upon you, you should remember that “saint” was the term Paul used to address the people in the churches under his care. “To the people of God,” who are “called to be saints,” is how he began his letter to the church in Rome. It was also the term he used to address the people in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. The Greek meaning behind the word “saint” suggests a person who is kindly, godly and pious, though not necessarily someone of moral purity. For Paul, it also applied to those who were committed to following in the footsteps of Jesus in their coming and in their going.

Our text for this morning suggests that saints are also those who choose not to pass by on the other side but who instead choose to serve those in need---no matter who they are. Now the purpose of a parable is to encourage listeners to identify themselves with someone in the story so that it becomes *their* own story, as well. Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan is a case in point. Jesus told the parable in response to a lawyer who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus asked him what was written in the law. The man answered: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “You are correct,” said Jesus. “Do this and you will live.” But then the man asked, “But *who* is my neighbor?” and Jesus replied by telling him this parable.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and he went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? The lawyer replied, ‘the one who showed mercy.’ Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:30-37)

Although there is no written evidence that Jesus ever used the phrase “above and beyond,” its meaning is clearly evident in this parable and in the job description Jesus spelled out for his followers. To his disciples he said, “If you would be great, you must first become a servant of all.” Therefore “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, for if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?” and “Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, but store up for yourself treasures in heaven.” So “If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” “Do onto others as you would have them do onto you,” and “if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second.” Over and over again, Jesus made it clear that to follow him meant being willing to go above and beyond the norm; above and beyond anything expected or even required.

Today, when I hear the words “above and beyond,” I see images of those first-responders running into the burning and crumbling Twin Towers on 9/11 to rescue people trapped inside--even at the risk and cost of their own lives. That’s going above and beyond. Sometimes the image is less dramatic but equally heroic, like the image of nurses and doctors bending over patients, day and night, week after week, performing life-saving procedures for those infected with the virus or some other life-threatening condition. Again, service above and beyond. Sometimes I think of a teacher spending her own personal time and resources in a “second mile” effort to help a struggling student earn a passing grade and get a boost in self-confidence, or I think of men leaving their jobs and families behind to attend the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers living in squalid conditions on our southern border. In each instance, their service was above and beyond.

And sometimes the image in my mind is that of so many of you, who give faithfully of your time, talent and treasure in ways that keep this church open and operating and reaching out to others in need, both near and far. While the phrase “above and beyond” may produce different images in different contexts for different people, its meaning remains the same. It means doing more than is expected; more than is required; and more than what you are even accountable for. It means “going the second mile” in service to others---no matter who they are. The late Peter Gomes, former chaplain at Harvard University, once said that “the Christian faith is not the triumph of individuals over evil, or even the solitary accomplishment of good, but rather a community, a fellowship of explicitly shared hopes and experiences, frustrations and failures.” And T.S. Elliott, in his *Chorus from the Rock*, asked, “What life have you if you have not life together? There is no life that is not in community.”

So we live not unto ourselves, but with and for each other, and for the least of those among us, which includes the stranger at our gate, the poor and hungry on the street, and the lonely and forgotten huddled under the bridge. And nowhere has this interdependence been more evident to me than in the saintly, selfless devotion of so many of you who have stepped forward and gone the second mile to ensure that family, friends, neighbors and even strangers were all safe and secure during the long, dangerous, and often lonely days of this pandemic. In addition, many of you have seen to it that the life and work of this church was neither stalled nor silenced during the past nineteen months by stepping up and helping out in so many different ways. Restricted from doing “business as usual,” you have adapted, modified and innovated, often in bold and creative ways, to make certain that the presence and power of Jesus’s way of love and service has remained visible and at work both in this church, in this community, and in the wider world.

While it would, therefore, be in order and altogether proper to recognize and honor each and every one of you by name today, that might exhaust the endurance of all of us and create a serious intolerance for the hard, wooden pews upon which you are seated. So, the decision was made to only honor a few in recognition of the many. So will Steve Carmichael, our church moderator and chairman of the board, and Polly Shannon, also a member of the board, please come forward and present their honorees.

PRESENTATIONS

Lisa Morgan and Brent Arnold have been recognized today as two people whose service has been “above and beyond” the call to duty. They represent of all of you who have also given of your time, talent and treasure voluntarily. Your faith, conscience, and commitment motivate your generosity and your good works. Ministers, on the other hand, are called, charged with specific tasks, and are then paid to do it. In other words, ministers are paid to be good; the rest of us are just expected to be good for nothing. But ministers don’t only do what they are called to do, which is to teach, preach, and provide pastoral care for their people. Ministers don’t punch time clocks; instead they’re on call. 24/7. There is never a moment, day or night, at home or away, when a minister can stop being a minister. So I have watched as Pastor Jonathan has gone about doing things during this pandemic that are part of his official duties as our senior minister, but I also know that he has been doing a host of other things that are not in his official job description because they are things which, to my knowledge, have never been written into **ANY** minister’s job description. They are *above and beyond* his call to duty.

Jonathan has guided this church through the storm toward a safe harbor beyond this pandemic. Without his calm spirit, steady hand, and innovative leadership, we might not have been able to celebrate this joyous day together.

So, Jonathan, we want you to have this wall plaque in commemoration of this day when the whole church rose up and said THANK YOU! Thank you for your faithful, creative, courageous, and innovative leadership during this extraordinary time. For who knows but that perhaps you, like Esther of old, were called to ministry as a young man *for just such a time and place as this*. The words engraved on this plaque read as follows:

ABOVE AND BEYOND
Jonathan Morgan
Pastor & Friend
With Deep Appreciation For your
Innovative Leadership
During the Pandemic of 2020-2022
First Congregational Church
Eugene, Oregon

And the whole church said “Amen!”