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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
10/30/2013, in preparation for All Saints Sunday
Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18, Psalm 149, Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-31
The Subjective Side of Saintliness

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Opening remarks by Pastor Fryer: This is my first Sunday back to Immanuel's pulpit and altar in my normal way since my open heart surgery back in August. Last Sunday I preached, but I preached a sermon written by theologian David Yeago. And then we were blessed to have Pastor Carol Fryer to serve as Presiding Minister for the Holy Communion. Today, I get to do these things again, and I want you to know that I am glad and awfully grateful to be serving again. I like to stand in this old pulpit and let my eyes roam over the congregation as I preach, because you folks are dear to me, and I try to keep your individual lives in mind as I prepare and as I preach the sermon. It does these eyes good to see you all again!]

This sermon is called "The Subjective Side of Saintliness," and it is based on this morning's Gospel Lesson. Let me read again the final part of our Lord's preaching. I do believe he is pointing out the path of saintliness to us:

²⁷But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. ³¹And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. (Luke 8:27-31, RSV)

If I worked at it, I could probably come up with half-a-dozen theological ways to somehow wrestle this text to the ground, to moderate it, to get it under control, and, in the process, to diminish its tug on our souls. But with all my heart, I do not want to do that. I believe that our Lord's teaching about loving the enemy, offering the other cheek, giving to the poor, and treating others as we would have them treat us is noble preaching. It is sublime and authoritative and in our heart of hearts we know that we should obey it and that the whole world would be a lot better off if we all obeyed it.

More than this: this preaching is the way of life of the One to whom we belong. This is the manner of life of our Savior. By baptism we are called to be his disciples, to walk in his steps, and to seek that his image should take shape in our lives. The call to love our enemies, to seek justice, to love kindness, to practice charity, to respect every human being on this planet — well, that call stands firm and strong and objectively measures our lives.

So in this sermon, I do not want to diminish the beauty of holiness as an objective standard. But I am indeed interested in the subjective side of saintliness. I want to talk about what it *feels like* to do the right thing.

CAT STEVENS

Back in the 1970s, the pop singer Cat Stevens wrote a song called “Father and Son.” It was a dialogue song — one in which Cat Stevens used different voices to express the point of view first of the father and then of the son. When I was young, I was all for the son. But nowadays, I think the father has some truth on his side. The father starts the song with these words:

It's not time to make a change,
Just relax, take it easy.
You're still young, that's your fault,
There's so much you have to know.
Find a girl, settle down,
If you want you can marry.
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,
To be calm when you've found something going on.
But take your time, think a lot,
Why, think of everything you've got.
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.

The father is speaking of changes he has felt in his own life. When he was young like his son, he felt the passions his son feels now. He knew the restlessness of youth, he knew the fires that burned within him, he knew how hard, how terribly hard it is for the young to “just relax, take it easy...take your time, think a lot.”

And because the father knows these things, he also knows how hard it is for the young to walk the path of saintliness. For that path takes discipline and restraint. It takes the hard turning away from fiery temptations and turning toward high, but seemingly calm ideals.

Each of us is somewhere along this spectrum between the father and the son. Let me try to give a word to each of us along wherever we are in our stage of life.

THE YOUNG

First, for the young man or woman I offer this: The path of saintliness does get easier as you get older. The fire within the body cools down some and the mind has an easier time controlling the body.

With the passing of years comes personal experience that some ways of life just are no good. They might be popular as all get-out, but you might soon reach the stage where you can say for yourself that your path is different. You mean to follow Jesus henceforth. You have tried other ways, and they have left your parched and coarse. You mean to do better going forward.

Also, with the passing of the years you become a little more confident in your ability to tread the path of holiness of life. It is a path requiring a sense of balance and alertness. For example, if we give away all we have, then we will have rendered ourselves unable to fulfill other important responsibilities, like the duty to provide for ourselves and for those God has placed in our care. And yet, we cannot be so preoccupied with our responsibilities to our family that we end up neglecting the poor of the land. It takes a sense of balance to fulfill all the demands of piety.

Another word of encouragement for the young: walking the path of virtue becomes easier as you get older because it is like many good things: the start of a good habit or a good way of life might be hard, but it becomes easier through repetition and through the changes in the soul that practice brings.

So, if you are young and you are trying to walk as Jesus bids you to walk, but find it hard going, be encouraged to think that it becomes easier as time goes along. Just keep working at it. Let each new morning be a good new chance to follow Jesus better than before.

MIDDLE AGED

Next, let me speak to those in the middle years. Martin Luther used to warn the middle-aged that they are threatened by the vice of covetousness. If they are not careful, they will become preoccupied with money and possessions. They will listen with only half an ear to the preaching of Jesus about loving the neighbor, praying for those who persecute you, almsgiving, and being “not anxious.” Their legitimate concern for the financial security of themselves and those they love can distort their piety and lead them away from the path of saintliness.

If any of this rings true for you, then use your increasing wisdom and self control to work for a closer walk with Jesus. Life has taught you things, including how to control yourself and your time. Use your increasing power to become a better disciple of our Lord Jesus.

THE ELDERLY

And for the elderly, I say this: If you have never really tried to be a saint, now is a good time to give it a try. You have many advantages for the task if only you will set your mind to it. For one thing, both the fires of passion and of covetousness might well have calmed down for you. If you are not a millionaire by now, you might never be. But then again, you might not need to be, for you have fulfilled many of your financial responsibilities already. You did the best you could with the struggle for money and security. Simplicity better suits you now. Now is the time to be thinking more spiritual thoughts and living more for eternity.

Err long, you are all going to be bending the knee before Jesus. This is true for each of us, both young and old. Compared to eternity, our remaining years are fleeting. Err long, we are going to be kneeling before Jesus and hearing what he has to say to us. These intervening days are simply days that are bringing us closer to that great conversation with our Saviour. Day by day we draw nearer to that great day.

When that day comes, we will be kneeling and listening to the one who says to us now, "Love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, offer your other cheek, give, treat others as you would that they treat you." It is not likely that Jesus is going to change his tune when we meet him in eternity.

A PERSONAL WORD

Let me close with a personal word. I spoke of this a bit in our recent newsletter. This is my first week back on the job following my open-heart surgery more than two months ago now. I rested at home for much of that time. Time never lay heavy on my hands. Especially for the first weeks, I spend much of the time simply sitting on the sofa, grateful to be alive, thinking about my place in the world and about what I hope to accomplish going forward. I feel as if I have a fresh start in life. I do not want to misuse the gift of time granted me by God. I hope to be a wiser pastor going forward. I hope to be a better person. I hope to be more like the person Jesus describes in his great sermon about loving the enemy.

Well, for each of us, we can adopt such an ambition now. You do not need to go through open-heart surgery to learn to cherish the days God has granted you. The path of saintliness is not impossible. It might be hard for you, but it is

not impossible. Be confident that you can make some progress in the matter. Who knows? One day, onlookers might look at us and say that, at least in the end, we began to look somewhat like a saint. Indeed, in the end, we began to look somewhat like our Lord and Savior Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.