

“Falling Down, Getting Up, and Doing Something Rather Than Nothing”

Luke 6: 20-31

All Saints Day 2022

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There was a man who visited a monastery in hopes of learning from the saints who lived there, how to live a more holy life. The man had heard that the most serious servants of God made a home there, so he knocked and anxiously waited for someone to answer and open the gates.

Moments later as he walked through the gate. He approached a particularly saintly looking soul and said, “Excuse me, could you please tell me, what do you and the other holy people who live here do all day behind these sacred walls and gates?” to which the saintly soul replied, “What do we do all day? We fall down and get up. We fall down and get up. We fall down and get up.”

And isn’t that what the saints we know have done? And isn’t that what most of us do each day of our lives? Fall down....and get up....rise and stumble, stumble and rise...and repeat. We fall down for a host of different reasons, but if Luke’s gospel tells us anything, it is that living as a servant of God is demanding and none of us do it perfectly—loving one’s enemies, doing good to those who hate us, praying for those who abuse us, turning the other cheek, and giving expecting nothing in return—this is difficult and challenging work on our best days. And truthfully, it seems to be getting harder and harder in this wild world, doesn’t it?

Take a look at the people gathered around Jesus in Luke 6 as he begins the “sermon on the plain.” You’ll remember Matthew’s gospel gives us the “sermon on the mount,” but in Luke, the gospel of the great reversals, Jesus comes to a level place, with the people—all those gathered, the great multitude of people who have traveled from all over, bringing with them their sorrows and their struggles. They’ve come to hear what Jesus has to say and to be healed of their diseases and cured of what ailed them.

One paraphrase of the text goes like this:

You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.

God’s kingdom is there for the finding.

You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.

Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.

You’re blessed when the tears flow freely.

Joy comes with the morning.

“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out,

every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me.

What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort

and that that person is uncomfortable.

You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—

for even though they don’t like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds.

And know that you are in good company;

my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you'll ever get.

And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.

Your self will not satisfy you for long.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.

There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

"There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them.

Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

Jesus comes to a level place to say something to people who feel like they are nothing and to warn people who believe they are something on their own, apart from God.

As the Jesus movement continued, the new community Jesus described began to form in which everyone was someone with God. Those who followed Jesus and those in the early church were called "saints"—literally meaning "holy ones." The word saint is not used to describe particularly good or exemplary Christians, but instead, the term is used to describe Christians in general. Paul uses the term often in the epistles, and we hear it in the All Saints readings from Ephesians.

We often think of the term "saint" as only applying to the holiest, fewest-grievance-carrying souls. But the saintly soul at the monastery reminds the curious man who visited that the saints inside the gates are no different than the saints outside the gates of that place: anyone who sets their sights on God and in doing so falls down and gets back up is doing holy work. The definition of being a saint then, is not a person who never fails, but a person who gets back up after falling down and keeps at God's work in the world.

This is what Frederick Buechner is talking about when he says, "Many people think of saints as plaster saints, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil deed their whole lives long...[but] the feet of the saints are as much of clay as everybody else's, and there is nobody God can't use as a means of grace, including ourselves."

There is nobody God can't use as a means of grace, including you and me. Whew—that sounds like some incredibly good news to me. The times I've failed to give to the person asking for help as I pass by. The times I've had more curses than blessings for those who are against me. The moments I've cozied up to grudges rather than love for enemies. That list is long for me.

So I find the truth that there's no one God can't use as a means of grace, simultaneously greatly comforting and tremendously challenging. It means despite ourselves, God can and will use us. So we don't have any excuses. Most certainly not our clay feet.

But some days, especially these days, it can be hard to know just how God can use us and our clay feet. Where is it that God can use our presence and energy, love and resources right now, in this season, when so many things call for urgent attention?

Father Daniel Berrigan was a Jesuit priest and activist, who died a few years ago at age 94. He once said,

“One cannot level one’s moral lance at every evil in the universe. There are just too many of them. But you can do something, and the difference between doing something and doing nothing is everything.”

This is why we need All Saints day: you and I need to remember all of the everyday ordinary saints who did something for God. At least once a year, it is good to remember that what makes one a saint is not perfect virtue, but a life-long willingness to be used by God. Saints are committed to getting up after falling down and to the ongoing belief that God can use us to do something transformative in this world. Being a saint is not about instantaneous redemption, but about being invested in the gospel of love for the long haul.

Father Daniel Berrigan’s name has now been added to the All Saints list of names—a list of names held together not by virtue, but by a willingness to be used by God. The All Saints list of names is a collection of people who were willing to attempt the demands of the gospel day by day—loving their enemies, doing good to those who hate them, praying for those who abuse them, turning the other cheek, and giving expecting nothing in return—falling down and getting up again....falling down and getting up again and again and again.

So until the day comes when your name and my name end up on the All Saints list of names, let us follow in the footsteps of the saints we’ve known and remain committed to falling down and getting up again. And when we think we aren’t up to the task or that the demands of the gospel are too much, let us remember all the saints who were willing to be used by God....all the souls who did something instead of nothing...those who showed up rather than giving up...those who chose the way of Love again and again. Those ordinary and complex people who loved and prayed and blessed others through their practice of falling down and getting up. Thanks be to God for these saints and all the saints. May we be like them.

Amen.

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