

**Sermon: Inspired by Saints**  
**Scripture: Micah 3:5-12 and Matthew 23:1-12**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: October 30, 2011**

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Today there is a convergence of a number of things that we acknowledge here in this Protestant church on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2011. It is officially Reformation Sunday when we remember the roots of our own tradition as being one of protest against the abuse of power. We remember the guts that it took one little monk back in 1517, when on the eve of All Saint's Day otherwise known as All Hallows Eve, October 31, he walked up to the church at Wittenberg and nailed his 95 theses to the Castle Church door. He was protesting largely the Church's practice of selling indulgences, which was a remission of punishment for sin, and the use of spiritual incentives for financial benefit off the backs of the poor.

That he did this on the eve of All Saints Day was not by chance for that was the church's celebration of exemplary Christians of the past who were faithful, devout, and godly people placing God first in their lives. It was a time of remembering the saints of scripture, both Old and New Testament, like Peter, Paul, Mary of Bethany and Junias, as well as the saints across the centuries of Christian history, like Julian of Norwich and Francis, Augustine and Luther, and, as we celebrate it today, those saints of the modern world and in our own lives who by their example inspire us towards lives of faith and action aligned to the Spirit of Christ.

But it is important to note, Martin Luther being a grand example, that often the saints were Christ followers distinguished often by their protestations of the current state of things. They were often not recognized in their day necessarily as anything other than troublemakers but often seen later as real catalysts for good in the world. In our scriptures this morning we recognize that both the prophet Micah, who would certainly be among the biblical saints, and Jesus himself being the very model of Christian Sainthood, were not saintly because of their peaceful saintly demeanor. Neither of them had a halo above their heads and were sitting around in a state of bliss being saint-ish; neither was Martin Luther nor Dorothy Day to refer to a more modern example of a saint, nor Martin Luther King, Jr. All of these people starting with Jesus himself were

maddening troublemakers, alienating themselves from the people around them because they refused to go along to get along. Apparently, their alignment to God put them squarely out of alignment with their society. We call many of them saints, in large part, because they were willing to sacrifice their comfort and their peace and their very lives for the sake of the greater good of others and therefore for God.

Why was Micah speaking so harshly against Israel? Because they knew not justice: “hear this, you leaders of the house of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right, who build Zion with warfare and bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness; who judge for a bribe and teach for a price and tell fortunes for money and tear the skin from my people.” And why was Jesus speaking against the Pharisees: because they “tie up heavy loads and put them on the shoulders of others, they love their places of honor and the most important seats in the synagogues and to be greeted in the marketplaces and to be called father and teacher.” They were confronting hypocrisy and injustice and calling for change. Sounds familiar, no? They might as well be saying “they love their money, their bonuses, their offices in the high-rises on Wall Street while they tear the skin from the people below them eliminating their jobs and healthcare!” It’s really not a far stretch to see the parallels. I’m not saying the protestors occupying Wall Street are necessarily saints, who knows if they are, but it is hard to read these scriptures and not hear some common themes of the challenge to the people at the top and not imagine that Jesus himself might have been a part of the kind of upheaval that these protestors are creating. In so far as they are confronting the status quo, the powers that be, and calling for more just and equitable practices to arise out of the economics and politics of our country, they are standing squarely in line with the prophetic tradition of Judaism and Christianity out of which often come the troublemaking saints who look to transform hearts of individuals and societies of their time.

But then there are the more personal saints of our own lives, in our more intimate pasts? There are those who have been important to us and who have given of themselves for the sake of our lives, maybe even suffered in their lives in order to make a better day for us in ours; who sought transformation not at a societal level but rather transformation at a familial or genealogical level. We all have families with patterns of dysfunction and sin which reach deep into our family’s past, patterns that have a very real impact upon

our lives in the present. Some families are riddled with deep and old patterns of alcoholism or drug abuse, of child abuse or neglect, of workaholism, which makes itself felt and known in no uncertain sense in family dynamics? All of our families are broken and riddled with such patterns which can be extremely difficult to extricate ourselves from. But there are saints within our blood lines who took on in their lives the burden of such sin, the weight of such patterning and had it broken over their backs so as to free future generations from having to endure it themselves?

I'm thinking of one who might be considered a saint in a family I know who is pictured here at this table. She was a grandmother, a great grandmother, abused as a child, neglected by her own mother and father, came to this country as an immigrant to make a better life for herself and her family and somehow rose above the violence of her past and chose another way for the raising of her own family, never lifting a finger against her children, working her fingers to the bone to give her children opportunities that she never had. She was a woman of deep and constant prayer who when she died had a peace and purity about her that was visible, tangible. She wasn't called a saint of that family but in retrospect it's how the family members see her.

And I'm thinking of another woman who was the black sheep of her family, the troublemaker, the one who was always rocking the boat, creating waves, causing tensions. But it wasn't until well after her death when her brother later in life reflected on the insights he had recently gained about the dysfunction of his family, a dysfunction that he refused to acknowledge but that his sister had been holding out for all her life. She was the only one who could stand speaking the truth about the family's issues while everyone else turned on her and made her the problem when in fact, this brother finally realized, she bore the burden of the sin and brokenness of that family. She, the brother said, was the saint living under our own roof that no one wanted to listen to or recognize. She was the only one willing to speak the truth despite the fact that it hurt her dearly. She was the saint in his life who even now inspires him towards truth and wholeness, honesty and patience even in her death.

That seems to be the way of saints. They are agents of truth because they are agents of God. They are catalysts for reform, whether familial or societal, because our lives need to be reformed. They are voices of protest because Truth must necessarily

confront that which is less than true. They suffer out of love because God is Love and love makes us vulnerable. They are not very common these saints but often come at just the right time in our lives or the life of the world and they come with a fortitude, a wisdom, and a love that is often unfathomable to those of us who are the beneficiaries of what they bring. May we aspire through their example to be people aligned to the love and truth of God for the sake of those who might remember us in years to come. Amen.