

All Saints Day November 1, 2020
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What a 1960's TV Show Teaches Us About Saints
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Before he portrayed the iconic James Bond on the big screen, actor Roger Moore brought the fictional character Simon Temple – otherwise known as *The Saint* - to life on television screens throughout the UK and later to America in the mid to late 1960s. My parents loved watching this show about a Robin Hood character described by the author who dreamed him up as “a buccaneer in the suits of Savile Row, amused, cool, debonair, with hell-for-leather blue eyes and a saintly smile”. Fans of the show might also think of him as the stick figure with a halo that was his signature calling card. Simon Temple operated outside the law to undermine and foil those who took advantage of the poor and oppressed. The villains in the world of *The Saint* were arms dealers, drug dealers, sex trade traffickers, greedy businessmen and corrupt politicians, whoever benefited from unjust systems that preyed on the desperate, naïve, innocent, poor, oppressed.

Despite such noble ambitions, Simon Temple was not above controversy. Legitimate law enforcement was his nemesis because he took the law into his own hands. And his methods were sometimes dark. His victims – who were all criminals- described him as a robber and a hood. And although the money he stole from criminals was either returned to those the criminals stole from or given to charity, Simon Temple kept a percentage for himself to cover expenses or shared it with his colleagues.

So, we might wonder, was Simon Temple a saint or a criminal, albeit a sophisticated one? Maybe the answer is complex.

There are multiple definitions of a saint. If you look the word up in dictionaries you are more than likely to find something about being exceptionally holy or close to God. Some religious dictionaries might define the word as someone who was an exceptionally good Christian, who embodied the values of our faith without fail, a hero of our faith. Others will reference persons who showed extraordinary courage in the face of religious persecution and died instead of denouncing their faith.

The trouble with such definitions is that it can be too easy, especially for the cynical, to tear down those put on such high pedestals. Such definitions can without intending to dehumanize the people who are lifted up as superior, making them and their faith out of the reach of many of us while unintentionally creating a narrative that might imply saints are saviors who will save those of us who cannot attain such lofty

heights. This narrative can make us forget our own connection with God and our neighbors and our responsibilities to both.

Examining what it means to be a saint is an appropriate exercise for today because this is All Saints Day, one of the principle or major feast days in the Church Year. A day according to the Church Calendar that is as important as Easter and Christmas. Saints must be vital to the Church if the Church has set aside a day to celebrate them. Because they are so vital, the Church has its own definition of what a saint is. And spoiler alert: The Church's definition is different from that of culture, even religious culture that makes saints into stained glass heroes.

If you go back to the Bible, you will find the word saint. It is used most often by Paul in his letters to followers of Jesus in various communities. And when Paul used it, he was not referring to the best of the best. He used it to refer to all people who had been baptized.

Remember, in our baptism, which we saw only a few weeks ago when we baptized Belle Schaefer, we are baptized into Christ's own death and his resurrection. We are washed with water and sealed with the Holy Spirit, marked as Christ's own forever, and thus we are sanctified, we are made holy, set apart as belonging primarily not to ourselves, our families, our schools, our communities, our employers, but belonging to Christ. The saints, according to Paul, are the sanctified, the baptized, the beloved children of God.

According to the Bible, saints are people like you and me, with all our complexities, our foibles, our joys, our good intentions. Saints are also all those who have come before us and those who will come after us and those of us who are around today doing our best to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves; who sometimes fall or fail, who thanks to the grace of God turn back to God and try again, who sometimes makes a difference, and always perseveres in the life of faith, even during this pandemic.

All Saints Day is also a day when we remember and celebrate the eternal connection we have with one another. This connection is not a sentimental comfort, it is a very real manifestation of God's love that cannot die even though our bodies eventually do. During and after loss, that love may look and feel like the pain of grief, but that doesn't mean it isn't real or good. This connection can be reassuring during difficult times like this pandemic, because while this might be the first pandemic you and I are experiencing, there are saints who have gone before us who have lived through other pandemics, and their stories can be powerful reminders that any suffering this pandemic produces is very real and harmful, but it will have an end.

Their stories can also help us figure out ways we can adapt and help during this difficult time. One parishioner shared an article with me about how a newly formed Kiwanis chapter created a temporary home for children during the 1918 pandemic to provide care and education while their parents were sick. Those saints stepped up and did what they could to provide a need during a difficult time. And when it ended, the children they helped were better off than they were before that pandemic started because they realized they were loved by entire community.

This is what brings us to today's Gospel lesson, a section of what is called The Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mountain. This section of the Beatitudes can help us in our All Saints Day exploration of what it means to be a saint, but we have to be careful how we interpret them. At first, it might appear Jesus was saying those who are oppressed or suffer for righteousness will be rewarded in some glorious afterlife. And that is what we have to watch out for, because that interpretation has been used to justify keeping people in poverty, oppressing women, people of color, the differently abled and mentally ill for centuries. We need to remember when Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mountain, he had been busy healing the sick, restoring them to wholeness and to their communities in their lifetime, not some distant life after death. The message Jesus was preaching was for this life. The in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven will look like comfort to those who mourn, the meek inheriting the earth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness no longer experiencing the emptiness of frustration and being filled, and mercy being freely given. In the Beatitudes, Jesus spoke of a reversal of the unjust ways of the world that allows people with wealth and power to take advantage of those who do not have as much wealth and power. The kingdom of heaven will give preference to the oppressed and poor not in an afterlife, but in this life.

Those of us who are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus are therefore baptized into that new kingdom of heaven life that has already started breaking into the world through Jesus' resurrection, that new life that brings healing, mercy, and justice to the world. The saints of the past remind us that striving for justice and mercy and respecting the dignity of every human being are ways of living that might not make sense to many in a world that rewards greed and corruption, and thus can cause us to suffer. But they also remind us it is possible for change to happen, not by our work alone, but through the grace of God working with us and through all the saints.

The saints also remind us this is not work for a season of one person's life, but a way of life for an entire lifetime for all the saints.

Now, back to our original question about the character called *The Saint*, Simon Temple and wondering if he is truly a saint or just a sophisticated criminal. Perhaps in the complex layers of the character's development there is a glimpse of an attempt to turn the tables on those who abuse power and people for their own gain, who cares in his way for the oppressed, who takes his percentage, and who can teach us being a saint isn't about our merit, about how good we are at practicing our faith or advocating for others, or what we do or don't do. What makes us saints is God's loving claim on us through Jesus' death and resurrection. This does not give us permission to behave in any way we like, but it does give us connection to those who have come before us who have persevered in faith and connects us to those will come after us, to each other and to God.

Instead of unknowingly putting our entire trust and hope in the unjust systems of the world, and waiting for a hero whether it is a religious hero, or politician, or business person, a celebrity, a billionaire, or other person of perceived superiority to save us, All Saints Day reminds us we are already saved by God's love and grace. Together with God and all the saints who came before us and those who will come after, we are connected in God's kingdom of heaven, and together we can persevere, adapting as we need to in order to care for each other and to bring the love of God in Christ to the world.