

SERMON: Alpha and Omega
TEXT: Revelation 21:1-6a

“A saint is a human being we celebrate for the sacrifices they make for their commitment to making the world a better place.” This is a quote from the 2014 movie, *St. Vincent*, starring Bill Murray. To summarize the plot: Vincent is an old Vietnam vet whose stubbornly hedonistic ways have left him without money or a future. Things change when his new next-door neighbor needs a babysitter for her son, Oliver, and Vincent is willing to take the job, for a fee, of course.

Vincent has few redeeming qualities and is not the kind of person anyone would want to have care for their child. He is a very poor housekeeper; he smokes, drinks, gambles, cusses, and keeps company with *ladies of the night*. He doesn't like people, and people don't like him. And he makes it clear that he has no intention of changing his lifestyle for anyone. But Oliver's mother is recently divorced and desperate. Oliver quickly takes a liking to Vincent for some reason, describing him as “interesting, in a grouchy sort of way.”

I won't tell you what makes Vincent a saint, because that would spoil the movie if you haven't seen it. But in the end, we learn that saints can be seriously

flawed while also exhibiting the qualities of courage, sacrifice, compassion, and humanity.

Most of us have much higher standards for anyone we might call a saint. When I see someone who works patiently and tirelessly with difficult people in trying situations *and* with little reward, I think to myself, “That person is a saint.” Sometimes, in observing how some married couples interact, we may find ourselves whispering to a trusted friend, “That man is a saint to put up with *her!*”

And, of course, the Catholic Church has very strict standards of virtuous living – including the performance of miracles – and a lengthy process to follow before anyone is recognized as a saint. I read an article which pointed out that, “...technically, the Church does not make saints; it recognizes someone who is in heaven. In addition to this, the Church is looking for folks whose lives are worth imitating and to such a degree that they should be held up as an example to the Church.” (Kevin Cotter, *How Does Someone Become A Saint? A Five-Step Process*, <https://focusoncampus.org>

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In our Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we find several references to saints. The Second Helvetic Confession, written in 1561,

says this: “We acknowledge [saints] to be living members of Christ and friends of God who have gloriously overcome the flesh and the world.... With ardent longings and supplications we earnestly desire to be imitators of their faith and virtues, to share eternal salvation with them, to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ.”

The passage we read from the book of Revelation is one of the four chosen to be used on All Saints Sunday. Revelation is the vision of a man named John, though probably not the same person as the gospel writer. In reporting his vision, John described “a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.’”

This is a day to remember the saints who have passed away from this life. But then we read that “the home of God is among mortals.” Think about that. Often when we talk about being mortals, it is with a qualifier. We are *mere* mortals. Human, fallible, finite, and sometimes seriously flawed. It feels a bit contradictory to me; can you be both merely mortal and a saint at the same time?

Yet, despite our mere mortal nature, *with us* is where God chooses to dwell, whether on earth or in heaven. We who count ourselves among God's people, provide the place that God calls *home*. In all of our faithfulness as well as our failings, in times of sacrifice and times of selfishness, in our giving and in our greed, through songs of praise and screams of pain, in triumph and in tragedy, from our beginning to our ending... we belong to God.

I remember hearing a story of a family that was highly regarded in their community. And every time their children left the house unaccompanied by a parent, Father or Mother would say, "Now, you remember who you are." In other words, there was an expectation that the children would live up to a certain standard of behavior to maintain the family's good reputation. Then I heard a sermon that applied this idea to the family of Christians. As followers of Christ, we are admonished to remember who we are, so as not to tarnish the name of Christian. The good news, however, is that we also have the assurance that whenever we fall short, we can remember *whose* we are. We belong to God.

The one seated on the throne in John's Revelation affirms this, saying, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." *Your* beginning and *your* end.

One of the most powerful, faith-affirming exercises I have ever done is to write my spiritual autobiography. I encourage you to try it sometime for yourself. It is simply to recount the story of your life, but with the added element of God. Even if you didn't realize God's presence or activity at the time, when you look back on your life now, where do you see God's hand at work – guiding you, protecting you, upholding you, urging you, calling you? As you work through this exercise, I'm certain you'll find that God played a bigger role in your life than you ever imagined. God is ALPHA AND OMEGA. God is in our beginning and our end and everything in between.

One Biblical scholar wrote this about Revelation. “Just as the book of Genesis is meant to help us understand our origins in the broadest terms, so the book of Revelation is intended to help us understand our ultimate destination. The answer to both questions – where we are from and where we are headed – is the same: God. Our ultimate origins are in God, and our ultimate end is in God as well. As T.S. Eliot wrote, ‘In my end is my beginning’: our final destination is the same as where we started. Some ancient Christian thinkers identified this pattern with the Latin words *exitus* and *reditus*: all things come forth from God, and all things ultimately return to God.... We are headed back to God. This is true not just for individuals but in a larger, collective, sense: eternal communion with God

is the proper destiny of the church, the nations, and the entire created order.” (David S. Cunningham, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

So, it seems to me, if God is at home among us mere mortals, and if God is both where we are from and where we are headed, and if we believe that and strive to live like we belong to God, then we are already saints. We don't have to wait until we get to heaven.

As we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper today, we will name and remember the saints of this church who now feast at the heavenly table of eternity. Though they have gone before us, we believe that they and all the saints of all times and places share this meal with us. And on that day when we discover a beginning in our ending, we will share eternal communion with them and with God. And eternal communion is more than just a cube of bread and a sip of juice. Eternal communion is a great feast, but it is less about the meal, and more about the community. The Lord's table is where we feast in togetherness, unity, and oneness with God and with all the saints.

We remember and we rejoice that God is ALPHA AND OMEGA, with us in all our beginnings, all our endings, everything in between, and for all eternity.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.