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All Saints Day (observed)

When I stop to think of “saints,” I often have images of long-ago church folk, such as St. Augustine, St. Francis, St. so-and-so and on-and-on. It’s cliché, of course, to point out that the idea of sainthood is in no way relegated only to priests and prophets of the past. We can look in this room right now and see saints around us, [as was just said with the children and their families]. But it’s probably true to say that not all saints are on the same level. There are ordinary saints, like us in our daily lives, and then there are truly exemplary Christians throughout the ages, Martin Luther King Jr. immediately comes to mind among the more famous of recent saints.

I think what connects most of the extraordinary saints throughout time, aside from their faith, is their absolute trust in God’s love no matter what happened to them. The truth of trust, which Brenda and I will be preaching on for the next few weeks, is something that really shines through clearly in our readings today and in the lives of saints. But it’s not just their trust in God’s love that shines, it was and is their actions, flowing through trust in God that makes them saintly examples.

As I pondered this in the wake of last week’s anti-Jewish terrorist attack in Pittsburgh, I stumbled into childhood memories of reading about a particular saint who I’ve not thought of in a long time. And since we are celebrating All Saints, I will share that saint with you in their blessed memory. This saint I’ve recollected is Maximillian Kolbe, who was born in Poland in 1894, and grew up in the Roman Catholic Church, being a good polish boy. His path in life was heavily influenced by a vision of the Blessed Mary the Mother of Jesus when he was just 16 years old. He later recollected “That night I asked the Mother of God what was to become of me.

Then she came to me holding two crowns, one white, the other red. She asked me if I was willing to accept either of these crowns. The white one meant that I should persevere in purity, and the red that I should become a martyr. I said that I would accept them both.”

The next year he became a Franciscan novitiate, with a path towards monasticism laid out before him. He moved to Rome not long after becoming a friar, was ordained a priest in 1918, and became an academic within the Vatican. Throughout his early ministry he was very much dedicated to the veneration of the Blessed Mother, but this is not what I gleaned from his life. It must be stated that the truth of his trust stemmed from his bedrock connection to this holy woman. She represents the trust of trust herself, for the oppressed and poor throughout the world, then as now. Maximillian Kolbe’s trust was that through this woman God had sent deliverance for all of humanity, and that while she is portrayed as meek and mild in her own nature, her own trust in the truth of God’s love bore Jesus Christ into this world. It’s out of that trust that Maximillian Kolbe lived and breathed.

After Kolbe’s work in Rome, he left for East Asia in 1930, establishing monasteries in China, Japan, and India. He very had little success in this venture, and due to this and poor health, he returned to Poland in 1936. History buffs will note that this was an extremely volatile time in Europe, as the entire continent was experiencing the rise of far right nationalism, most prominently in Germany. The hate spewing demagogue of Germany was ascending to dominance, and was not subtle about a distrust of non-Aryans, particularly Jews.

That hate and distrust grew, and it was by the normalization of hate among regular people that the fascist regime took on more and more power, leading decent people to shrug off the clear signs of trouble, either through the fear, or through an unwillingness to speak truth to power. The boiling point of all of this, of course, really came to fruition in September of 1939, when

Germany launched the blitzkrieg, a lightning war, against Poland. Maximillian Kolbe and the monastery he resided in turned their space into a hospital, even as they witnessed the Nazis devour their homeland with bombs, steel, and bullets.

Even after the initial dust had settled, Maximillian Kolbe continued to work out of his monastery on behalf of refugees fleeing violence, including 2,000 Jews, who were hiding for their life's sake from nationalism's industrialized killing machines. Kolbe also began publishing anti-Nazi literature, saying out loud what few others would in the face of the Nazis. Like the Romans in Jesus' times, the Nazis didn't need an excuse to dehumanize and kill anyone who they perceived as disorderly or decrying their power. For two years he spoke out, until the Nazis shut his monastery down in February of 1941, and arrested Kolbe. He was transferred to Auschwitz in May of that same year, along with Jews, gypsies, gays and lesbians, the handicapped, darker skinned people, refugees, and all manner of the disorderly undesirables of the German Reich and their conquered lands.

He continued his ministry in Auschwitz and paid for it in violent beatings. In July of 1941, a few prisoners escaped the camp, and the commanding SS officer decided set an example for other would be escapees. He chose ten men to be starved to death in an underground compartment, just to make a point. The last man selected pleaded for mercy, saying, "My wife! My Children!" and that's when St. Maximillian Kolbe stepped in, offering himself as a replacement for the condemned. He was placed underground with the other nine. Guards and prisoners who checked in on them said that Kolbe was always leading those in that room in prayer, calmly caring for those suffering with him. This went on for two weeks, without food or water, and though the other nine had died, Kolbe was still alive. The Nazis ended his life, not out of mercy, but because they needed the space for further atrocities. The legend is that Kolbe

willingly accepted a lethal injection, even handing his arm over to the oppressors. He died on August 14th, and they cremated him the next day, which oddly enough is the feast day of the Assumption of Mary.

What gives me hopeful pause, even in the face of this horror, is that there was at least one person in that extremely dark time in world history, who was willing not only to speak out against hate and oppression, but who trusted God's love so much that he was able to calmly deliver over 2,000 hunted people to safety. Despite the hatred towards Jews and other non-Aryan refugees, the truth of trust in Maximillian Kolbe led him to seek goodness in the face of despair, and to live out the things he loved, rather than simply fighting the things he knew were wrong.

This All Saints day, as we reflect on sainthood, and an upcoming election, in the rising face of darkness, hatred, and fear, hold up the light of truth. The truth that we can trust in God's love, that God's love will overcome this darkness again and again. We must be the ones, to act out of that trust, like St. Maximillian Kolbe and all the others over the ages. We must speak and act not just against hate, but also of love. We must speak and act against violence, but also of trust. We cannot just speak, we must act.

You are saints, go and be one out there. You don't have to be extraordinary, but you do have to act out of the truth of trust. Show the world why you trust in the truth of God's love. It may cost you, but God will do more. Trust that.

Amen.