

All Saints Sunday A
I John 3:1-7
November 2, 2008

I have been watching – belatedly on DVD – the HBO series about John Adams, and I have been enjoying it very much. I have always been fond of John Adams, maybe for some of the same reasons that I am fond of the apostle Paul. Adams was vain, ambitious, pompous, and persistent. And yet he accomplished great things. More than anyone else, it was John Adams who single-handedly bullied the Continental Congress into declaring independence in 1776, into creating these United States of America.

Yet he is often forgotten, and frequently ignored, this stout little New Englander. Adams, our second president, always suffered by comparison to the two towering Virginians, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who book-ended his administration. He could never boast the leadership abilities of Washington, nor could he claim the sheer brilliance and charisma of Jefferson.

And yet he was a man of deep principles, a man capable of winning and holding the love of Abigail Adams, herself a force to be reckoned with in those days. He was filled with a love of life, a love of his country, and a passionate commitment to the rule of law and the balance of power. But he was also fearful and insecure, a blowhard, a self-aggrandizer. He was never popular, and history tends to forget him. His face never even made it onto one piece of our coins or currency.

Like all of us, John Adams was a mixed bag.

And I've been thinking about John Adams this week, as I have been anticipating this celebration of All Saints. Because John Adams, to me, exemplifies the problems we have when we consider this business of sainthood. We like our saints to be, well – saintly. We like them lofty. We like them pure. We like them strong in their faith and noble in their character. We think they are like the throng gathered at the throne of the Lamb in the lesson from Revelation. Saints are people who could handle a terrible ordeal, who could stand up for their faith and who could die for their faith.

We like them “patient and brave and true,” as the song goes.

We like Francis of Assisi, standing there sweetly with the birds up and down his arm and a wolf lying peacefully at his feet. We like Joan of Arc, with her cropped hair singeing in the flames as she dies for Mother France. We like Thomas Cranmer, up in his study, drafting exquisite liturgical words for the Book of Common Prayer. We like Martin Luther King, Jr. standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, proclaiming his dream. We like Mother Teresa, lifting another starving baby in her arms in the slums of Calcutta.

And so we conveniently forget the other side of the stories. We forget that Francis ran nude in front of his father and a bishop to proclaim his devotion to poverty. We forget that Joan of Arc hacked people to death with her sword. We forget that Thomas Cranmer recanted all his Protestant faith, and only unrecanted when he was sentenced to be burned anyway. We forget Martin Luther King’s infidelities. We forget that Mother Teresa had no sense of the presence or support of God through all her long years of ministry.

Because we want them to be special. We want them to be so much better than we can ever be. We want them to be the saints so we can be the schlubs ...not “patient and brave and true” but impatient, fearful and too often false. It lets us off the hook, you see. If we can never be as great or noble or faithful as they were, then we don’t even have to try.

But to honestly believe that line of reasoning is to sell ourselves too short.

And so I offer for our consideration this morning, Saint John Adams, that prickly, proud Bostonian, that forgotten Founding Father, that awkward and difficult personality who nonetheless, never let that personality get in the way of his call to service of a greater good. Because to me, John Adams is a saint of God, and because he can be a saint, I suspect that most of the rest of us might be able to be one too.

John Adams, you see, was a good person. He was faithful and devoted to his wife. He always put his financial and physical well-being last and his country first. He suffered long separations from his family. He was a man of honor and principle. He was a man of the law. And he never once said “no, let someone else do it.” When called to duty, he stepped up.

He was a really good person, in the way that most of us say in our own self-defense, “Well I think I’m a good person.” Or “I try to be a good person.” We are good people. We pay our bills. We try to be nice to our neighbors and co-workers. We say “please” and “thank you”. We care about our children. We care for our aging parents. We give back to our church with time and talent and treasure. We recycle. We vote. We bring in canned food for Haven House. We don’t lie, or cheat or steal ... much. We do our duty. We are good people indeed.

But like John Adams, we are also fallible human beings, with our personality flaws and foibles on display for all the world to see. Some of us are insecure, afraid to speak out. Others speak out too boldly and too often, until the room is filled with the sound of our own tiresome talk. We are irritable. We are self-righteous. We are forgetful. We are whiners. We are gossipers and backbiters. We argue when we should make peace and settle for uneasy peace when we should fight. Some of us are self-satisfied. Some of us are resentful. All of us are incredibly self-absorbed.

At all times and in all places, we are, for better and for worse, our selves.

And I’m not sure any one of us is really going to change. Not fundamentally, I mean. A rose is a rose is a rose, as Gertrude Stein put it. As we age, we become more and more the person we already are. Or as a wise old nun I knew once said, “The older you get, the more so.”

But what we see in the life of John Adams is that God can do great things with anybody, even a vain, insecure and pompous lawyer with a tenacious spirit. John Adams was, God love him, from start to finish, himself. And God did love him, and guided him and strengthened him and somehow made him tolerable enough to his fellows so that his vision of a free America could win the day.

God can do great things with anybody. Anybody. We don't have to be ... as Stuart Smalley used to say on Saturday Night Live ... "good enough and smart enough, and darn it, people like me." I can tell you personally, that most of the time I am NOT good enough, I am infrequently smart enough, and darn it, some people are never going to like me, no matter what I do. And I think everyone here can say the same, if we are honest with ourselves.

But what if that doesn't matter? What if we don't have to wait to become any better than we already are? What if the grace of God is sufficient for you and for me, as wonderful and as awkward as we are, to do the work that God has given us to do?

And so I wonder, if we opened ourselves up to that possibility, what sort of sainthood might we be called to tackle, just as we are, just who we are? What if God can use us in spite of all our flaws and failings, because the good person chugging away underneath those flaws sees that there is holy work to be done?

As I look out at this congregation this morning, I wonder: what saintly work has God set before the public school teacher, the MSU staffer, the retiree or the stay at home parent? What noble cause needs the hands of the state employee, the GM worker, the middle school student or the nurse? Where is the Kingdom of God itching to come to life in the tender hands of the writer, or the gardener, or the musician?

The saints of God, you know, ARE just folk like me, and just folk like you. Just folk like John Adams, and just folk like all our beloved dead whose names will be offered on the altar in the Book of Remembrance. We are all of us weird and wonderful, broken and brilliant, difficult and divine, hapless and hopeful.

Nonetheless, we are saints. Nonetheless, we are called. God can do great things with any one of us. God intends to do great things with every one of us.