

DYING TO BE SAINTS

--We pastors, by virtue of our office, do find ourselves at times in some very odd and interesting situations. In thinking ahead to this "All Saints" occasion, it was one of those situations that came to mind for me.

As you know, I served my previous congregation for forty years. That's a long time to be rooted in one place. Among other things, that meant that for the local funeral directors, virtually all of whom I had worked with over those years, I was the "go to" guy when it came to finding a pastor for a family who had no pastor and who wanted one to officiate at the funeral. Given that, I got the contact to do the funeral for "Denny," as I shall call him--which, when I heard the details, had me wondering what possible motivation there was for having "a man of the church" conduct his final rites.

Denny, you see, was not a church-goer anyplace. In fact, there was nothing in his life that indicated he accorded any importance at all to Jesus or to God. What he was was a "biker," part of a local gang of bikers in the Harrisburg area who had a rather questionable reputation. The stories that I was hearing suggested clearly that he was more than a bit of a bad boy. In fact, his death, as I recall, occurred under some suspicious or traumatic circumstances, as a direct result of his rather rough lifestyle.

Denny was a veteran, however, and that entitled him to be buried at the Indiantown Gap National Military Cemetery. If you've ever been there, then you know that services at Indiantown Gap take place, not in some elaborate chapel, but outdoors in one of several open-aired little niches built into the rolling landscape. It was in one of these that I was positioned behind Denny's flag-draped casket, while opposite me on the other side stood all of his biker comrades and their women, come to pay their final respects. It is fair to say that, in that group of the gathered, there were more tattoos and more chains on leather than I had ever seen in my life--or, for that matter, that I have ever seen since.

This occasion would prove to be a challenge for me, because I believe that such a final service for a life should honestly reflect something of the person about to be interred. In deference to the unique life that has been lost, a funeral or memorial service is never a "one-size-fits-all" matter. But what does one say over the body of a "Denny"?

Among other things, I came up with this line, which, given the present company there, I was a bit nervous about delivering: I said, "Denny wasn't any sort of saint"--being completely accurate and honest--to which was added, "but then he never wanted to be one, either." Apparently the line struck a chord, as all those bearded faces and shaved heads immediately broke out in laughter, telling me that I had hit the nail on the head.

I swear that I came very close that afternoon to inheriting Denny's Harley Davidson!

--Why do I recount this story? Because, quite simply, we're not Denny, and by virtue of our

being connected to the church, it can be assumed that we do desire to be among the saints.

By that, I do not mean to reference the fact of our deaths--that, one day, we shall be taken from amongst our family and friends and thereby be in the position of having our names printed in St. John's bulletin and of being remembered on the next "All Saints" occasion.

As comforting as that thought might be, it runs counter to Paul the apostle, who has something else entirely in mind. The various gifts of the Spirit, he writes to those Ephesians, are "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (4.12).

Equipping the saints? Presumably, the dead are beyond being able to minister to anyone or build up anything--meaning plainly that "the saints" are the living, that "the saints" are those who populate the church of Ephesus and every other church community, indeed that "the saints" are you and me, who can and who, as part of our Christian calling, must contribute to that ministering and that building up. Or we might as well be dead.

--The understanding of the saints as being those who have died does have it half-right, though: There is a sort of "dying" that occurs in the life of every genuine "saint." It is an ongoing dying to selfish interests and pursuits, with the aim of a corresponding quickening and animating to grow interiorly and to be of compassionate service to others. That continuing "dying" is what distinguishes the true "saint" from everybody else, in or out of the church.

In short, without some effort focused on this symbolical "dying" to our small and narrow selves, there will be no coming "to the unity of the faith," to draw on Paul's language (4.13). There will be no developing "to maturity, to the measure to the full stature of Christ," there will be no "grow[ing] up in every way into him who is the head," there will be no building ourselves up in love" (4.15,16). And we shall forever remain but "children, tossed to and fro by every wind" (4.14).

So, in this figurative sense, are you "dying" at all to be a "saint"--even just a little? Oh, I hope so, because, when it comes to Spirit, little things can be huge things.

The alternative is just to jump onto our Harleys, as it were, and go on our reckless, selfish ways.

Given the needs of this world of ours, how sad would that be?