

Sermon: Sunday, October 31, 2021 All Saints Sunday Celebration

The Story of One Saint

Two thoughts converged in my heart and mind this week: All Saint's and The Atlanta Braves in the World Series. That is why I started thinking about my dad: One of God's saints who loved the Atlanta Braves. My dad was a saint and I want to use this biographical sermon to show you what it means to be a saint. Here's a man who walked the walk, who followed Jesus from sunup to sundown, from baptism to the grave, and on to heaven.

Protestants have an allergic reaction to "saints." We either think that's a Catholic thing or we say, "I'm no saint." "We are all sinners" and "No one is perfect." Have you noticed that these have become the major defenses for what once was plain sin? We need to rethink our responses to the "saints."

Not everyone has the privilege of being raised by a father that reminds them of God. This is why the metaphor of God as Father has always been important to me. Not everyone can say "Father" and I encourage folks to say "Our Mother who art in heaven" or "Our God."

I asked Dad about his faith as he faced death at age 91. After all, if faith is worth a plugged nickel, it should help us die well. We talked straight to one another. "Rod, the truth. Don't hold back. The truth. All of it." "Dad, the doctor says that you have cancer all over your body and you are going to die soon. How is it with your faith? Is it well with your soul?" He said, "YES. I am ready for the Lord to guide me home" (Revelation 22). Our text today meant a lot to my dad.

He had such a great sense of humor. People met him and fell in love with him. Both of those big hands would clasp yours and those clear eyes would twinkle and in the last few years, with mama gone, he was as likely to ask a 35- year-old to marry him in the aisle at Brookshire's as not. A hospice nurse asked, "Mr. Kennedy are you allergic to anything?" "Widow women" he retorted, with a laugh.

On the morning that he died, Daddy asked Chester, the nurse's aide sitting with him and caring for him that morning to pray with him. Chester was a bi-vocational African American preacher and he prayed with Dad. When the praying was done, Daddy folded his arms across his chest and died peacefully. The devil tried, the cancer tried, old age tried, but Daddy beat them all and went to heaven on the wings of a consecrated prayer, and it means so much to me that the praying was done by a black man for a white man named after the president of the Confederacy.

Our daddy loved Jesus, baseball, mama, pot roast, purple-hull peas, speckled butterbeans, fresh tomatoes, his family, fishing, and hunting. Daddy and Mama drove to New Orleans for my graduation from seminary and we went to this little dive on Lake Pontchartrain – a faded yellow house with a bar as soon as you stepped in the door. They brought out a large loaf of French bread that had been hollowed out, slathered in butter and filled with a dozen and a half-fried shrimp with French fries all around the sides. The top of the loaf had been placed back on top and the dish was called a shrimp boat. He ate the whole boat. Nobody loved to eat like Jeff Kennedy. He loved a feast. He could work over a meal like a sculptor with his clay, turning the act of eating into a masterpiece performance, a wonder to behold. Now, he is at the banquet table of our Lord, feasting with Abraham and Moses and the all the saints. Our faith has always been about feasts – prodigious feasts. I often lament that we have made a quick snack out of the Lord's Supper instead of the feast it should be.

We grew up believing that only two subjects mattered in this world: God and baseball. My sister, Jan, was the best baseball player in Union Parish and she played shortstop for Daddy's team until they wouldn't allow girls to be on the team with boys anymore. He taught us how to play the game. He would go to the baseball field with me and have me stand behind the pitcher's mound facing the outfield. He would hit high flyballs and shout, "Left, right, or center." My job was to go get that ball. Catch it and throw it back to him on one hop at home plate. I loved playing the outfield. There's such a grace and majesty to chasing a fly ball into the deep corner of left field and hearing the soft sound of the ball nestling in your glove. Heaven on earth. I grew up with a baseball in one hand and the Bible in the other.

A lot of Dad's life was spent at the plant – Commercial Solvents and later IMC. A chemical plant. Asbestos. Fertilizer that is now prohibited. Lung disease. Cancer at the end. He would work all day, all night, and then work his day shift the next day without a break and with no meal from the company. Those were the pre-union days. If you ask me why I support unions, that is why. For most of our childhood we thought "Overtime" was his middle name. When I was 12, I made the league All-Star team. I was the starting pitcher and pitched 3 no-hit innings. I had 2 ground-rule doubles and we won 15-0. My dad had to work overtime. He didn't get home until the next afternoon at 4:30. I was standing in the yard playing catch with Jan when he got out of the car. That worn-out man raced across the yard, scooped me into his arms, shouting, "That's my boy. That's my boy."

I want you to know about the greatness of this man who was a hero and didn't even know it. My father could fix anything that was broken: cars, plumbing, electric appliances. Many a hot summer evening, he crawled around under the home of a neighbor to fix a plumbing problem. No charge.

Being a good neighbor. Imitating Jesus. Jeff Davis Kennedy deserves to be elected to sainthood.

Daddy trusted Jesus. No holding back. No fiddling around. He trusted Jesus and he wanted you to trust his Jesus too. While he never twisted any arms, when you were around him, you knew he was one of the disciples of Jesus. If someone asked me to prove Christianity was true, there's not a philosophical argument that I would use. One ancient Christian said, **"It did not please God to save his people by arguments."** I would bring the doubter, the agnostic, the atheist, to meet my daddy and say, "There goes Jeff Kennedy. That's what it means to be a Christian." If you would rather see a sermon than hear one, then take a look at Jeff Kennedy.

He was a humble man. One year the plant supervisor asked dad to give the devotional at a special Thanksgiving service. It was held at noon in a large building in the middle of the plant. My dad worried all week that no one would come because he didn't think anyone knew him that well. At noon, he walked into a building packed with 500 fellow employees who applauded as he stood to speak. They called him "Mr. Jeff."

One cold Thanksgiving Day, we were in a hole 12 feet deep and 20 feet wide, trying to find a leak in a water pipe. Freezing cold, the work wasn't going well. I had come home to visit and eat turkey in mama's kitchen, not spend my day in a hole full of mud looking for a leak in a pipe. The hole kept filling with water that made it almost impossible to find the leak. My dad, enjoying the sight of his PhD son doing back breaking physical work, put down his shovel and said, "Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this day, for this hole and this leak. And thank you for this picture of my son, standing here in this hole, trying to find a leak in a water pipe. Thank you for life's blessings. Amen." Anywhere, at any moment, that big strong head would drop and he'd start praying. Every night, prayer as we went to bed. Down on his knees next to his bed. Every morning prayer as his eyes first opened. At every meal prayer. At the slightest hint of trouble, prayer. For his children, his grandchildren, and his great grandchildren, pray. When that big strong hand engulfed yours and that strong voice started imploring God at the throne of grace, you felt ready to take on the world.

When Daddy prayed, the angels hushed their singing. You half expected the waters of the D'Arbonne Bayou to pile up on either side. At home we would lie in the darkness and Daddy's voice filtered through the walls from his bedroom where he was carrying on a conversation with God. When Jeff Kennedy prayed for you, you stayed prayed for.

I nominate Jeff Kennedy for sainthood in a poem, borrowed in part from James Autry's *Nights Under a Tin Roof*:

O God

let him go dreaming when he goes
let him go attending a revival meeting
with the congregation eager beyond discomfort
on an insect laden night

Let him go singing bass
on a Sunday morning
his head above the others
his voice bringing power beyond
power in the mighty love of God.

Let him go drifting in his boat
past Horsepen Creek
with his fly rod whistling in the breeze
landing in just the right place
and the bluegill bream roiling the water
taking the bait
fighting across the bayou
as Daddy laughs and hauls him in.

Let him go walking the red clay hills and piney woods
his bird dogs out in front
their noses in the breeze
then halting, frozen in place,
till his boots stamped the ground
and the covey of quail
exploded with fury of feathers and sounds filling the air
and Daddy shooting quick – bam, bam, bam – and sure
Three shots, three birds
Not bad for a country boy.

Let him go praying
at a table of country summer food
roast and gravy, purple hull peas, speckled butter beans, fresh from the
garden tomatoes, and mama's coconut pie, even the tater salad that once
gave them both food poisoning and nearly killed them forty years early.

Let him go praying from the deacon's pew in the old Antioch Church
with his family around him like disciples.

Oh God, thank you, that of all the ways that Daddy could have gone, he
went praying and dreaming of standing before the throne of grace at last,
with Mama by his side and his eyes filled with wonder and adoration.