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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church  
November 3, 2013  
All Saints' Sunday  
Luke 6: 20-31

### **“The Butterfly Effect”**

In 1961, a low-profile assistant professor at MIT, Edward Lorenz, created a basic computer program to simulate weather. His discovery that day later became known as the butterfly effect. One day Lorenz abbreviated one number representing atmospheric **conditions**, from .506127 to just .506. That tiny alteration dramatically transformed his long-term forecast and led to the development of a law called sensitive dependence upon initial conditions.

Lorenz' discovery was later popularized when he failed to provide a title for a talk he was delivering in 1972. So the organizer concocted the following title, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?"

Thus, the law of sensitive dependence upon initial conditions became better known as, “The Butterfly Effect,” the idea being that the tiny flap of a butterfly’s wings can make all the difference in the world.

And so this morning, I begin with a simple question: Like the flap of a butterfly’s wings, can one person make a world of difference? I think All Saints’ Day teaches us that yes, he or she can.

And so this morning, as a part of our All Saints’ Day celebration, I want to talk about the difference one person can make. It seems a fitting thing to do on All Saints’ Day. After all, isn’t this the day we honor the saint, or saints, who made a difference in our lives?

Now I realize that for some of us, saints may seem like a Catholic thing. After all, Protestants don’t have any saints, and the reformers did away with the whole saint thing eons ago. *But that’s too bad.* Because All Saints’ Day is the one day we have to acknowledge, name, and thank God for the people who made a world of difference in our lives. **Today**, we honor and commemorate the people whose butterfly wings have brushed us and made us into who we are.

The saints are a part of the "vast cloud of witnesses" that the Bible talks about. They are the people:

- who have shaped and molded you;
- who loved you with unconditional love and patience, forgiveness and grace;
- who pushed you to become more than you thought you could be or **wanted** to be, for that matter;
- who inspired you by the courage and integrity and faithfulness of their lives.

Some of them are extraordinary: the apostles and martyrs, the great towering figures of history—St. Peter, St. Paul, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa. And some are ordinary people. In fact, most of our saints are.

They could be your parents, perhaps, who loved you and encouraged you and whose love continues to be a driving force in your life . . .

Or they could be surrogate parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, husband or wife . . .

Or teachers, or friends, or Scout leaders, or coaches who gave what they had to give to you and saw in you what you could not, at the time, see in yourself. Saints are people who called you to work hard, to sacrifice, to give, to love, and inspired you to reach deep inside yourself, and helped you to become the person you are today.

Saints, Frederick Buechner wrote, are not "plaster statues, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil thing their whole life long." "Saints," Buechner says, "are essentially life givers. To be with them is to become more alive" (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 102).

Like the flap of a butterfly's wings, saints are the people who made a world of difference in your life.

We don't if the people Jesus was talking to that day when he delivered his sermon on the plain and spoke those famous Beatitudes we heard from Luke, we don't know if they made a difference in the world, but we do know that the words he spoke that day did. The words he said to the saints gathered that day, were revolutionary. No one had ever before called a person who was poor, hungry, meek or despised blessed. But here Jesus was, saying all of these things about people the world considered unworthy of a blessing.

Why? Why would Jesus say something so outlandish?

Because Jesus knew things needed to change. People had become unmoored from their faith; some no longer practiced it with any diligence; while others who did practice had become so routine and dry that their faith lacked any depth or conviction. So in Jesus' thinking, the situation called for a return to the law. But not a strict legalistic interpretation of the law; the new interpretation would remind the people that when those who are most cursed among us – the poor, meek, hungry and despised – are blessed, all lives are transformed. And transformed lives equate to transformed communities. And transformed communities are capable of transforming the world.

I think Jesus knew that day – even though he would never have called it this – I think he knew that the world can change with one person being blessed by the brush of a butterfly's wings. But not only that, Jesus knew that we all stand together, we are heirs of the work that has gone on before us. None of us stand alone; all of us are effected by one brush.

About this time 6 years ago, I attended the funeral of a friend, a woman I admired very much. She was one of my saints; the flutter of her butterfly wings definitely made a difference in my life. At her funeral the minister quoted her as saying:

“I did not get to this place on my own. God had carefully prepared the way for me. Each mentor/ friend/ professor/relative seemed to have been hand chosen by God. Each person had a part in God’s plan to guide and love me, and ultimately prepare me for this moment and this ministry.

All of these people -- all of these relationships -- were part of God’s plan. God knits us together in relationships -- all of us together here on earth.”

She knew that we are not in this alone and that we could not be who we are today without the help, love and encouragement of our saints. As Sister Joan Chittister wrote: “We do not do it alone of course. We are companioned through life. Underneath it all, holding us up . . . are the people who love us. . . . They stand by. . . . They provide the unchanging foundation of love.” (Called to Question). All Saint’s Day is a great reminder of that.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book the Outliers, explores this idea further. He writes about ordinary people who become extraordinarily successful and concludes that none of us is a self-made woman or man; we’ve all been effected by the brush of butterfly wings. He wrote:

*We carry with us generations of people before us. People do not rise from nothing. We owe something to parentage. . . . People who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work and make sense of the world. . . . The legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine. (p. 19).*

And Andy Andrews expanded on this idea in a little book called The Butterfly Effect in which he catalogues the extraordinary impact one person’s simple and courageous efforts make in another person’s life.

Except when you go back, you can never really tell whose efforts made the biggest difference. So, for instance, should Norman Borlaug, who developed high yield, disease resistant corn and wheat be credited with saving two billion lives from famine, or should Henry Wallace, the one-term U.S. Vice-President, who created an office in New Mexico to develop hybrid seed for arid climates and hired Borlaug to run it. Or should we credit George Washington Carver, who took a young Henry Wallace for long walks and instilled in him his love of plants. Or should it be Moses and Susan Carver, who adopted the orphaned George as their son. Or should it be... Well, you get the idea. Andrews points out how inter-connected our actions are, creating an unforeseen butterfly effect that can ripple across time and space to affect the lives of millions.

The butterfly effect. It's a wonderful image for All Saints' Sunday, because it's a reminder that our actions and words shape other people and the world in which we live. And, it's a reminder that we have all felt the brush of butterfly wings with our saints, who made a difference in our lives.

After you receive communion today, you'll have a chance to write the name of your saint on one of the many butterflies scattered around the windows, and then hang that butterfly on a branch-serving as a reminder that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. But I also want you to take a butterfly with you, so that you have a reminder that your actions, and your words, affect the lives of others, too.

*O God, before whom the generations rise and pass away: we rejoice today in the communion of saints, in the remembrance of friends and loved ones who once walked with us in mutual love. We are thankful for every precious memory of their goodness, and sustained by contributions each made to our common life. Our faith that Christ lives brings us the assurance that we are not separate in your boundless mercy. Renew us all in faith, hope, and love; that we may share more deeply the fullness of life with you that is not limited by time or space, or weakness of any kind. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*

Sources:

[www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), "Dear Working Preacher: The Butterfly Effect"; August 21, 2011, David Lose

Feasting on the Word, Volume 4, Year C, Commentary for All Saints Sunday

John Buchanan, "A Sermon for All Saints' Sunday", 2009, for quotes from the Outliers and Sister Joan Chittister