

## You Are Saints!

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

**1Corinthians 1:1-9**

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Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,<sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup> just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Last week I mentioned my spring cleaning project: cleaning out my office— giving away things that were once useful but I don't need any more, books I won't read again, outdated files, things in the cabinets. Here is one more thing I found, which I actually plan on keeping because it's so cool (thank you Cathy Draper): Jesus soap. A bar of soap in the shape of Jesus. It would feel really weird, and wrong, to use this in the shower. But it's cool. "Wash all your sins away."

This morning I have a simple message about being saints. That is who we are and what we are; that is what God has made us and declared us to be, and

calls us to live into. Now, saints don't use Jesus soap to get scrubbed clean—to become saintly! In fact, as we will see, being a saint has nothing to do with us getting *ourselves* scrubbed clean. Or trying to manufacture holiness on our own, for that matter. It has everything to do with what *God* has done, and continues to do, that makes us saints. And, this is an inside job!

Most likely there are few, if any, here on anywhere, who would call themselves saints, or consider themselves such. And that is because we have not accurately or fully defined what a saint really is.

Over the centuries there have developed two different definitions of a saint. The most common definition of a saint is a person who has been recognized by people, but particularly by the Catholic church, for having served God in an exemplary way and contributed to the betterment of the world in significant ways. And perhaps they lived an exemplary life—although some who have been recognized as saints were rascals! If we hung out with them in person, we wouldn't exactly see the glowing halo over their heads.

Most of the people we think of as saints lived many centuries ago. For example, we call the disciples saints: St. Peter, St. John and so forth. And St. Mary, the mother of Jesus. St. Paul, the apostle who wrote most of the NT

epistles. We think of Saint Francis of Assisi or St. Teresa of Avila. Amazing people, and it needs to be said that the historic Church often equated sanctity with what is bizarre. Some of these people lived on top of pillars, like St. Simeon Stylites who lived on a small platform on top of a pillar for 37 years in Syria. Or they never washed/bathed, like St. Joseph Labre, who lived his life among the ruins of the Roman coliseum. Some never slept, like St. John of the Cross. Some loved suffering, like St. Louis (Luigi) of Gonzaga, who daily sought out bodily suffering as his way of relating to the sufferings of Jesus.

And of course there are other, more “normal” and contemporary saints, like Mother Teresa, now canonized as St. Teresa of Calcutta, whose life and work we love and admire. Yet who none of us would probably aspire to become. Nor should we. She lived out her calling, just as you and I live out our calling.

These images and definition of a saint make them seem very remote. However, there’s another, much older definition of a saint. The word saint, literally, means one who has been made holy *by God*. We tend to think of someone who is holy as someone who does big holy things or who lived a perfect life—someone who is like our first definition of a saint. But the understanding in both the Old and New Testaments is that anything is holy that belongs to God.

Anyone is holy who belongs to God. It's that simple. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says this beautifully, "The Jewish people were said to be holy, not because they were extremely good, for they never claimed any such thing, but because they belonged to God and were God's instrument for effecting God's will in the world. So also with the Christian fellowship. Members of Christ's body were certainly *expected* to be good, reflecting in their lives the qualities manifested in Jesus himself; but they were members of that body not because they were morally excellent, but because they had been called to share the life which is in Christ." Holiness, in this biblical understanding, does not stem from what a *person* does, but from what *God* does. And what God says about you.

Thus, we see St. Paul referring to *all* Christians as saints. For example, in our reading for this morning, he opens his letter to the Corinthians by saying, "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus ("sanctified" literally means, "made holy" or "holy-fied"), called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

St. Paul called these Christians saints, not because they were leading exemplary lives, but because they belonged to God, and were loved by God in

Christ Jesus. In fact, St. Paul's letters were usually written to help the church clear up some serious problems. In this letter to the Corinthians, for example, immediately after this introductory salutation he goes on to address divisions that existed in the church; he speaks of jealousy and strife among them, and refers to bad behavior of a kind that he says is not found even among non-believers. Yet, he addresses these people as saints! So you see, it has nothing to do with human attempts to be something, but God's work in Christ to form us into his people, and work through us to accomplish his work in the world.

So, you are saints! Just like, at the very beginning of Matthew's gospel Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." He doesn't say, "You can be salt and light if you try real hard, and earn it." Or, "If you feel like it" or "If you're good enough." No, you ARE salt and light. Deal with it. That is who you are. Salt and light, and saints.

The celebration of all saints day is a celebration of saints by both definitions. It's a celebration in which we give thanks for the many *heroes* of our faith, some who even died for the faith, because through their work and their lives we see God's work in beautiful ways. We thank God for the writers of the accounts of the Gospel, through whose efforts we have a knowledge of Jesus' life

among us. We give thanks for the many Christian martyrs who died that the faith might live on and be received by future generations.

We give thanks in a more personal way for those whom we have known and loved, and who loved us, through whose lives and words we have experienced God's love—parents and other relatives, teachers, friends. Through these saints Christ has come to us in meaningful ways.

And, at the same time, the celebration of all saints is also a celebration of who all of us are and of *whose* all of us are. God has made us his people. Through our faith, we belong to God. That's why we celebrate this ancient holy day—to remind ourselves who we are and whose we are and how we have come to this point in our journey of faith.

All of us are saints of God. We are a holy people, not because our lives are what they should be, but because God has made us a part of his community. However, since we are a part of his community, we are called to be responsible members of that community. We live out our life together as a holy people, because God has made us holy. Our pilgrimage together is one of becoming what we already are. You are a saint! That is who you are. Now, live into that. Be, and continue to become, what you already are.

In the historic Apostle's Creed, one of the oldest creeds of the church, we affirm that we belong to the "Communion of Saints." Past and present. The communion of saints. The cloud of witnesses who have gone before, and the present company of believers, fellow saints, who join with us in the pilgrim journey of faith, as we live out what God has called us to be and become.

Whenever we affirm our belief in the communion of saints we are affirming so much: our debt of gratitude to Christians in the past who have passed on the faith to us; our belief that the Church, in whatever form it takes, is indeed a community of people united in Christ and that we have been called into that community through the grace of God; and our hope that God will enable us to become what we already are: the communion of saints.

Now, whenever I talk like this, in declaring our identity as saints, it's interesting to me that there is almost always pushback. And the pushback almost always goes something like this: we're not saints, we're sinners. Sinners saved by grace.

I understand that and I'm sympathetic with it because we indeed have had it drummed into our heads over the years that we're sinners. And so that is the primary way that most Christian adults think of themselves, if not consciously

then subconsciously. Because that's what many preachers have told their congregations: you're sinners. And although the message has been "Jesus came to save us," we still had it in our hearts (and perhaps still, our heads) that our main identity is, I'm a sinner. Even if we've been Christians for most of our lives.

And I want to get it into our heads and hearts that we are not "sinners."

That is not how the Bible sees or defines you. As I've said before, there are only a handful of places where the term "sinner" is used, and when it appears it is almost always used hyperbolically or symbolically (for example, in one of Jesus' parables, to make a point) or it's used pejoratively, as a derogatory label. But Jesus himself never used that word to describe any person, and when he talked to people he either called them friend or he called them by their name.

"Sinner" is not how God sees you or defines you. We need to get away from that kind of self-talk or self-definition (I'm a sinner, or I'm a failure, or I'm not worthy, or however that message gets translated and internalized). The Bible says *we have sinned*; it's something we've *done*, and sometimes still do. But it's not *who we are*. Who we are is beloved children of God. And, saints! That's what he calls you.

Again, St. Paul begins all of his letters with the greeting: "To the saints at... Ephesus" (or Corinth, etc). Not, "to the sinners at..." And in Ephesians 3:18 he

prays that we would have power to comprehend, with all the *saints*, the expansiveness of God's love. He doesn't say, "...with all the sinners... I pray that you would know how wretched you are..." NO! "I pray that, with all saints, you would know the immensity of God's love in Christ Jesus."

That's how God and Scripture define us—as saints, who are rooted and grounded in the love of a big God, whose love is vast and incomprehensible. Imagine how that would change how people think and act if we all thought and acted from a place of understanding ourselves primarily as beloved, not primarily as sinner. And perhaps you already do, and if you do, good on you! But my experience over the years is that many, if not most, church members don't believe that about themselves, and therefore don't believe it about others. No wonder we struggle with our relationships sometimes.

We are saints! We are beloved by our gracious God. Our call is to live into that identity. God has already done the work, in Christ. So now we live into and *grow* into it.

We're not going to be called to live on top of a pillar, or among ruins. And, please take a shower! (I have Jesus soap if you'd like 😊) We're not called to be Mother Teresa. You know who was called to be Mother Teresa? Mother Teresa. You be you, the you God made you to be, who called you into the life of the risen

Christ, and into Christian community, to serve God with the unique and wonderful gifts you have been given.

As part of this, along the way, as we live out our calling as saints, it's helpful to be reminded that when God created us, we were created *good*. So I'll end by going back to the very beginning—Genesis 1.

Author Danielle Shroyer explores the theme of what she calls original *blessing* (instead of focusing on original sin). In her book titled, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in Its Rightful Place*, she writes:

“Sin is not the primary thing that is true about us. Before we are anything else, we are made in God’s image, and we are made to reflect that image in the way we live. Before scripture tells us anything else about ourselves, it tells us we are good. I think that’s because that’s the way God intended it. When we ground ourselves in the fact that God created us good, we are capable of confronting all the other things that are true about us, even the difficult things. Love is tremendously healing.”

God created us and made us good. God has further sanctified us in Jesus Christ, and called us to follow him into the world as salt and light, and saints.