

We Are All Saints

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1 Peter 2: 4-10

Scripture: 1 Peter 2: 4-10 (NRSV)

⁴Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Let us pray:

Holy One, we give you thanks that you called us to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, your own people. May the words I will speak and the thoughts we will think help us realize our role as living stones both full of life and life-giving.—Amen

We all know the power of a child's imagination. I almost called this sermon "Think Like A Child." Remember what it was like to be a child, to think like a child?

I do. When I was 9, my family attended All Saints Episcopal Church. We celebrated All Saints Eve (also called Halloween) and All Saints Day. On that day and that day only we sang the hymn, I Sing a Song of the Saints of God—a catchy tune with simple yet meaningful words that is still a favorite. I took the song quite literally. If all these people had been saints, and you could meet saints wherever you went, then I wanted to be a saint too.

Now, let me make it clear, I am not saintly (just ask my mother or my husband) and I definitely do not have the patience of a saint (sometimes I think it is the exact opposite.) I do not know much about saints. I am familiar with a few—some saints from the Bible, such as St. Peter and St. Paul, saints from history like Joan of Arc, saints of legend like St. Patrick, St. Christopher and St. Nicholas.

A few years ago, my dad stumbled across a movie about St. Therese of Liseux at the video store and we rented it. I was surprised by Therese's story and in many ways could relate. A modern saint, she was a nun for less than 10 years before an early death. She never went on missions, never founded a religious order, and never performed great works. The youngest of 9 children, she was impetuous, sensitive, emotional and spoiled, especially after her mother's death and a serious childhood illness.

As a Carmelite nun she would never carry out impressive works. She wrote: "Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me." She smiled at the sisters she didn't like. She ate what she was given without complaint. Accused of breaking a vase when she had not, she got to her knees and asked for forgiveness. Little sacrifices counted more than bigger ones, for they were unrecognized.

Therese wanted to be a saint. She wrote, "I have always found that there is the same difference between the saints and me as there is between a mountain whose summit is lost in the clouds and a humble grain of sand trodden underfoot by passers-by....It is impossible for me to grow bigger...But I will look for some means of going to heaven by a little way which is very short and very straight, a little way that is quite new."

So I know that some of you are wondering, where am I going with this? The UCC doesn't have saints in the sense of the Catholic Church. However, if saints are just people like you and me, then maybe, maybe there is a way we can all be saints, not because of great deeds but in the routine of our daily lives. There is nothing special or unique that saints have that we do not. Or perhaps it is better to say, everything special and unique they have, we have. We are, in the words of contemporary theologians "spiritually equal" (Stiver, 2009).

The verses from First Peter provide interesting contrast. We have Jesus as a rock, a stone, a cornerstone, a foundational piece that is static and steady, but that stone is living and organic. "A stone is living if it is uncut and still in its natural place. Thus an uncut stone is the worst of all possible stones to serve as a corner stone" (Van Harn, 2001, p. 552). We as Christians are built into a spiritual house. The house is a temple, and the temple is a place for priests to offer sacrifices. Christ is the cornerstone, "no Christ, no Building" (Van Harn, 2001, p. 552). One commentary said, "He is a living stone, and Christians are living stones as well, full of life and life giving" (Bartlett, 1998, p. 265). Just as Jesus is the stone that was rejected and became our cornerstone, we are both rejected by the world and chosen by God. We are not only commended as holy, but called to holiness (Bartlett, 1998, p. 267).

This scripture is one from which the idea of universal priesthood or the priesthood of all believers is derived. God is accessible to all and all have potential to minister for God. We are given extraordinary opportunities to impact others, to make a difference in a way that appears little but turns out to be larger than our humanity can expect or imagine. Jesus, being Jesus, changes the rules. Priests have no special rights or relationships or power to mediate on our behalf. From the Reformation forward, we have embraced this ideal. We are all priests, and I stand before you this morning as a part of this community of many priests.

Just as the definition of priests changed from a select few to all, I see a similar shift in who is counted as a saint. Could it be that you are a saint? Perhaps I am a saint? What if we are all saints?

I am sure if you think for a moment, you can recall such saints from your life. Mr. Louie was pleasantly chubby with a balding head and a snowy white beard (maybe he was Santa Claus's younger brother). Every Sunday he led children's church before we went to Sunday school. We all wanted to be the one he chose to carry the cross. He had to get up early and gave up the opportunity to attend his own class. Mr. Louie was a wonderful storyteller and knowledgeable about the Bible. You could ask him to tell any Bible story and he would sweep you away into a different time and place. He prayed every Sunday for people who had birthdays, and I remember how proud I was to kneel and place my birthday offering in his prayer book. It saddens me now that I do not know much about Mr. Louie outside of church, but I think he might be pleased to see how the children he nurtured grew into loving adults.

On All Saints Day in many churches a Litany of the Saints is recited. I decided to forgo the whole litany, but in preparing for this sermon, came across a version from our sister church, the Disciples of Christ, that has this note: “The litany can be expanded to include saints known to the congregation.”

I choose this morning to recognize the living saints in our midst--those who welcome visitors greeters or not, those who work behind the scenes with little or no recognition, those who tutor children even though they haven't been to school for years. Those who deliver meals and are the only face someone ever sees, those who labor tirelessly for causes that matter. Anyone who has shaken the hand of a visitor or spoken a kind word to a stranger, given of their time or talent when tired, busy or rushed. These little deeds loom large in the lives of others and are the mortar holding the living stone of the church together.

I choose to see the saint in each and every person. Will you?—Amen

References

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