

Calling All Saints

Sterling UMC
November 1, 2009
1 Peter 2:4-10

May I ask you a question? Who are you? It sounds like a simple question requiring a simple answer, but it really isn't. For example, you might say, "I'm Fred Smith."

And I might say, "No, that's your name. Who are you, really?"

You might reply, "Oh, I'm a bank manager."

"No," I would say, "that's what you do."

"I'm an American," you might declare.

"That's where you live."

"I'm a Methodist," you might retort.

"That's your denominational preference."

You could also give your height and your weight and say something about what you look like. But your physical dimensions and appearance aren't you either.

Who are you? Would it offend you if I said you are a saint?

Now, I say that might offend you, because most of us don't really like saints. Oh, St. Nicholas perhaps, because he brings us presents at Christmas. Or St. Francis. He liked animals. But real saints in the here and now tend to make us uncomfortable.

A man was sitting in a bar downing one drink after another when a man on the barstool next to him said, "What's wrong?" The first man said, "I'm drinking to the memory of my wife. She was a saint on earth. She went to church three times a week, spent her days reading and quoting the Scriptures, sang hymns and psalms all evening, filled our house with religious tracts, and had a Bible study in our living room on Thursday evenings."

"She sounds perfect," the second man said. "How did such a pious woman come to die so young?"

"I strangled her," the first man replied.

We don't really like saints in the here and now, do we? It's all right to talk about St. Paul and St. John but we're not ready to be called St. Fred or St. Andrea. After all, a saint is somebody special, somebody who has a unique relationship with God, somebody who lives somewhat in another world.

And we don't want to be hypocritical at this point. It's like the story about two brothers who had terrorized the small town where they lived for decades. They were unfaithful to their wives, abusive to their children, and dishonest in business. They were loud, boisterous and just plain rude to nearly everyone. One day, out of the clear blue, the

younger brother died. The older brother went to the preacher of the local church and said, "Preacher, I'd like you to conduct my brother's funeral. And it's important to me that during the service, you say my brother was a saint."

The preacher said, "I can't do that. We both know he was far from that."

The older brother pulled out his checkbook and said, "Preacher, I'm prepared to give \$100,000 to your church. All I'm asking is that you publicly state that my brother was a saint."

On the day of the funeral, the preacher began his sermon this way. "Everyone here knows that the deceased was a wicked man, a womanizer, and a drunk. He terrorized his employees and cheated on his taxes." The preacher paused for a second and then continued, "But as evil and sinful as this man was, compared to his older brother, he was a saint!"

We don't want to be hypocritical. And yet I have the somewhat painful pleasure to inform you that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a saint.

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. We remember those persons who have influenced our faith development, whose presence is still felt in our lives even though they now rest from their labors. We give thanks for the contributions they made to our lives.

But friends I am here to remind you that if you call yourself a Christian you are also called to be one of the saints. In Romans 1:7, Paul said he was addressing the Roman letter to "all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints."

In 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul addressed the Corinthian letter to "the church of God which is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints."

In fact, the term "saint" must have been Paul's favorite word for describing Christians because he used it about 60 times in his letters, which is especially surprising when you realize that he never once called them Christians. And yet "saint" is not a word we use much in the church today. I've never heard anyone in this congregation say, "Yeah, my wife and I are having a few saints over to our house for dinner tomorrow night" or "My insurance agent is a saint."

But it certainly would be appropriate to say that. Because a saint, as the term is used in the New Testament, is not an especially pious Christian who has died and has been canonized by an ecclesiastical council -- St. Peter, St. Augustine, St. Patrick. The Greek word translated "saint" literally means "set apart one" or "holy one". And according to scripture, every Christian -- whether well-known or unknown, leader or follower -- every Christian is a saint. In the biblical sense, the most obscure Christian is just as much a saint as the apostle Paul.

And so if you're a Christian here this morning, then you've been called to be a saint. I want to talk a little bit about what that means to us.

As I've already suggested, the Greek word for "saint" is very closely connected with the Greek word for "holy", and that's not a word we like to use much either.

I think maybe the reason is that the word brings with it some negative images. We hear people talk about those who have a "holier than thou" kind of attitude, and so to claim to be holy doesn't seem to be something we want to do. Also, the word seems to suggest to us a glowing halo over someone's head and so we don't really think of ourselves as being "holy".

Our text from 1 Peter 2:9 says this, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Ruth Bell Graham once said, "A saint is one who makes it easy to believe in Jesus." I like that. As I understand it, saints are just ordinary people loving God and following Jesus. God takes ordinary people and uses them for a holy purpose. Sometimes God calls them to speak a word or to perform some deed. But saints are just ordinary people who have listened to God's call and said, "Yes."

That's what God has been doing for each of us. We have become holy people. God has made us saints. I like this quote from Neil Anderson: "What you do doesn't determine who you are; who you are determines what you do."

Because we are saints, because God lives within us, that means there needs to be something different about the way we live. Holiness means letting Christ rule our lives, doing what he wants us to do. It means that we make a concerted effort to rid our lives of ungodly traits and strive to add those qualities that make us more like God. Living a life of holiness makes a difference in the way we act toward others, the way we talk, in our very character.

Those of us who are Christians are not special because of who we are. But we are special because of the one to whom we belong. Because we are the children of a holy God, we must allow his holiness to dominate our thinking. We can't continue to live in sin because we are holy. We devote our lives to praising and glorifying God because we are holy. We can't help but tell others of the Savior who died for them because we are holy. We are God's saints, because when God comes close (and he is so very close), then something becomes holy, and that something is us.

Saints ARE ORDINARY CHRISTIANS WHOSE LIVES REFLECT THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST.

ON THIS SPECIAL DAY WE REMEMBER THOSE ORDINARY PEOPLE OF EXTRAORDINARY COMMITMENT.

We remember those special people who have meant so much in our faith development - Sunday School teachers, pastors, close relatives, mothers and fathers, friends.

We remember those special persons and give thanks to God for the privilege of walking beside them and for their positive influence in our lives.

ON THIS ALL saints' SUNDAY WE ALSO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE BUILD UPON THE FOUNDATIONS THEY LAID. We follow in those special footsteps.

Every generation has the joy and the responsibility of transferring the message of Jesus Christ to the next generation. The apostles spread the message of salvation to the next generation, and that generation spread the Gospel to the next and so on for twenty centuries. We didn't come to Christian faith all by ourselves. We build on a foundation that has taken twenty centuries to construct.

IF WE ARE GOING TO BUILD ON THAT FOUNDATION, HOWEVER, WE TOO, ARE GOING TO NEED TO BE ORDINARY PEOPLE OF EXTRAORDINARY COMMITMENT AS WELL.

That is our task. That is our duty. So this morning God is calling all of us. He is calling all saints to take a stand, to be a witness, to make a difference in this world in which we live by living a life of holiness and obedience to Jesus Christ, to build on the foundation that has been laid by those who have gone before us. And I don't know about you, but I want to be in that number.