

“What is a Saint?”

Colossians 1:1-14

October 31, 2021

Several years ago, New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a piece that has stayed with me, both on the desktop of my laptop computer and in my head. The title of the piece was “Becoming a Real Person,” and the column explores the process of making meaning of our experiences, of finding some deeper purpose that enables us to build a life, not just make a living. Brooks worries that, while our cultural and educational systems have become increasingly proficient in teaching career skills or developing cognitive abilities, we are often left entirely on our own when it comes to developing a moral or spiritual purpose. He quotes a professor of psychology at Harvard who says, “I have no idea how to get my students to build a self or become a soul. It isn’t taught in graduate school, and in the hundreds of faculty appointments and promotions I have participated in, we’ve never evaluated a candidate on how well he or she could accomplish it.” The professor concludes that this is simply not the role of higher education, and maybe he’s right. But the question persists for me: Where do we learn how to build what another Harvard professor, William James, described as “a morally significant life?”

Where do we form character? Where do we learn how to become real people? Or in here, we can ask it this way: Where do we discover our God-given identity and purpose? The most basic answer is that we learn character from other people, especially those closest to us. We imitate and emulate until we discover in time who we are called to be. We become who we are largely as a result of the experiences we have with the people who surround us. It takes a community to become a real person.

Today is not only Halloween; in the Church it is All

Saints Sunday, a day for remembering those we love and those we have lost, a day for giving thanks for witnesses who inspire us, who challenge us to deeper faith, who propel us to bolder commitment. Every year I hear from a few folks who are surprised that we are celebrating this feast day in a Presbyterian church. For most of us, the word “saint” is closely associated with Catholic or Orthodox church traditions and their veneration of holy persons who act as intercessors, or bridges, between an individual believer and God. Or, perhaps this morning your mind moves in a different direction, toward the city of New Orleans and its NFL team. I did briefly consider titling my sermon today, “Saints—Who Dat?” but decided it was neither the right time, nor the right city, for that.

What exactly is a saint? It might help to know that many centuries before any particular, specific Christians were venerated by the church, the Apostle Paul used the word to address his letters, greeting all fellow believers as saints. He wasn’t writing to people who had died. He wasn’t writing only to faith heroes. Paul’s letters were written to churches, to *communities* of real human beings. I say communities because, though Paul uses the word many times, he *never*, not once, employs the word “saint” in the singular. Paul never refers to a specific person as a saint. For Paul, the church gathered in the name of Jesus Christ is the communion of the saints. It takes a community to form a saint.

In the earliest church, saints were not the rock stars of the Christian faith. They were neither miracle workers nor models of purity and piety. Saints were disciples of Jesus Christ. Saints were all those called to embody the faith they professed. I love Thomas

Merton's definition: "A saint is not someone who is good. [A saint] is someone who has experienced the goodness of God." In his letter, Paul says something similar to the Colossian saints. "You have heard of this hope in the gospel that has come to you...and it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it." Paul even lifts up one particular fellow servant, Epaphras, who has been that model for the Colossian Christians, "a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf." (Colossians 1:7)

As Jesus followers, the foundational conviction of our faith is the belief that God—Almighty God, the sovereign, all-powerful, majestic Lord of all creation—chooses to be enfleshed, to live in this world. We call that conviction the incarnation; we celebrate it every Christmas when we proclaim that God has come to be with us in Jesus Christ. But here's the beauty and the mystery of the incarnation: It did not stop with Jesus. Throughout the scriptures and in every era of history, God has been known to us in the lives of other human beings. Epaphras, "our beloved fellow servant, a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf." Ordinary people—flawed, faithful, *real*.

They inspire us. They bless us simply by being who they are, in all of the pain and the struggle, in every celebration and joy. Not perfect people from whom holiness continually radiates like heavenly light, but flesh and blood reminders of God's goodness.

Today, we remember them all. Some saints are people we knew and loved, who showed us God's love and taught us to care for others. Some are those we miss every single day. We try our best to live in ways that honor their memory. Some saints are people we never knew but whose commitment built the community we now enjoy. Sometime, when you have a free moment, I invite you to visit the memorial garden just outside the sanctuary and read the names of saints whose faithfulness gave us a church to call home, whose names are written not just in bronze and stone but in the stories that shaped Second Presbyterian Church and in the heart of this congregation. This day, remember the saints.

Remember the Sunday school teacher who read you the stories of scripture and taught you the songs of faith. Remember the patient soul who mentored you and loved you into faith—maybe loved you when you weren't so lovable. Remember the saints who invited you to deeper commitment, to service and leadership. Remember the saint who saw your gifts and mirrored them back. "You're really good at that. You should try this." Remember the saints who were kind and courageous, who were gentle and bold, who were compassionate. Remember the saints who sacrificed on your behalf, who gave, who served, who planted. Remember all the saints.

On this day of remembering and recommitting, my heart is tugged toward the gift of God that was Ray Bowden, a minister of Christ who served faithfully for ninety-five years and was called home in January. Among the countless gifts Ray offered this church in his thirty-five years here, perhaps his greatest gift was his authenticity. Ray was a real person. It was early January, and I didn't know it would be our final conversation. It was over the phone. I had called Ray because he recorded a podcast with my wife, and I was calling to thank him for the wonderful wisdom he shared. The recording of that podcast is now a treasure in our lives. One of the greatest gifts is that Sara had Ray read the Christmas story from Luke Chapter 2, those words now preserved in his voice. In that conversation, Ray of course told a joke, and we laughed. He asked me to pray, and I did. I also asked Ray for some advice on ministry in a challenging time. I was quite open and vulnerable with him about how difficult this time in the life of church ministry was, and Ray paused to think about how he might respond. And then he said, "Chris, you're doing a fine job. Just keep preaching the gospel, and the rest will work out." God bless the saints who point not to themselves but to the goodness of God.

And now, consider this: *You* are called to sainthood. You are called to live your life in such a way that someone else will see God's goodness and grace through you. Together, we are responsible for

helping each other become real people, fully formed in God's gracious image. And that's why we come to church—to practice together the rituals that form our character and shape our lives. This is why we bring our children to church, so that they might know some Ray Bowdens and some Epaphras-like saints in their lives. It's why we practice our faith at home, so that it becomes an embedded part of who we are. We are called to be saints in the lives of others. And we can make the decision to respond to that call this very day.

Some of you likely know that Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister in addition to being a television host and America's favorite neighbor for more than a generation. In 1997, Mr. Rogers received the lifetime achievement recognition at the annual Daytime Emmy Awards ceremony. That evening, before a crowd of thousands at Radio City Music Hall, Mr. Rogers received his award and then stepped gently to the microphone. After expressing his appreciation to those who had helped him on his journey through life, Mr. Rogers offered an invitation to everyone in the room and all who were watching on television. He said, "Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who helped you become who you are? I'll watch the time." With that, Fred Rogers did the unthinkable in a Hollywood awards ceremony. He stopped speaking. He looked down at his watch. Here's how one person in the room described what happened:

There was, at first, a small cheer from the crowd, then a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter, and finally sheer silence as people realized that he wasn't kidding, that Mister Rogers was not some convenient fool but rather an authority figure who actually expected them to do what he asked ... and so they did. One second, two seconds, three seconds ... and now the jaws clenched, and the chests heaved, and the mascara ran, and the tears fell upon the beglittered gathering like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier. After ten seconds, Mister Rogers looked up from his watch,

said, "May God be with you" to all his awestruck children, and walked off the stage.ⁱ

On this Sunday set aside for honoring all God's saints, take some time to remember and thank God for those who helped you become who you are. Imagine that you are not alone on this journey but surrounded on every side by witnesses cheering you on, urging you forward. They strengthen you with their words: "You're almost there... You can do it... Be brave... Don't give up!" Some of them are sitting next to you right now. Some are easily reached by a phone call or a visit. Some have drifted, but their witness remains strong in your heart. Some are cheering you on from the balcony of heaven. Name them. Reflect on them. Thank them. They are watching, encouraging, strengthening you. Let that truth guide your living.

Remember the saints. Remember that you, too, are called to sainthood. Real people living God's love. For *all* the saints, thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ This remarkable video is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Upm9LnuCBUM&feature=relmfu>