

Saints in our Midst
Saint Mark PC
All Saints Day

A young boy went off to a summer camp for a week run by a church group. He had a great time with the games and waterslides, and loved most everything except the daily chapel. He was in 4th grade, and thought chapel every day was just too much.

So his mind would wander in the brief chapel services, and he would be looking at the sun shining through the blues and reds and oranges of the stained glass windows. One morning the chapel leader noticed that lots of kids were looking at the sun shining through the windows, so he wisely stopped and said, "you know boys and girls in those stained-glass windows are pictures - pictures of the saints! Abraham and Isaac, Paul and Timothy. And he would explain how there was a Bible story associated with those pictures.

When camp was all over, the boy's parents came around to pick him up, and he told them how fun it was. And they asked him what he learned about the Bible and God. He couldn't think of a single thing he learned the entire week.

His parents were a little upset about that, but you know sometimes these lessons sink in and we don't know. Several weeks later, his mother was thinking about a Sunday School lesson to teach about the saints. Her son says, "Oh mom I know all about the saints"

His mom, said, "really?"

He said. - "Yes, the saints are cool. You know they are the ones who the light shines through."

That is as good a description of saints that I have heard. Saints are people whom the light shines

through. So on the day we remember those who have passed into the church triumphant, remembering the light that they brought to us. But also we recognize that saints are not just people in stained glass windows, the saints are you and me.

Saints are everyone who is in Christ Jesus. Some hear that and scoff - "I am no saint, we are not saints - some believe that saints only reside in stained glass windows, or statues in churches. Or we have the idea that a saint has achieved perfection

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If that is our idea of sainthood, then we are in for a surprise when we read this scripture from Philippians today. Saints are not just in stained glass windows.

The first chapter of Philippians is Paul's greeting: Paul the apostle to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus in Philippi. He was talking to everyone there. The amazing part of Paul's theology is that all followers of Christ Jesus are saints.

What does he mean by this? It is staggering to think of, but in essence it is this: We don't need to do something, to earn something, to be perfectionists or have some exceptional skill. Sainthood is given to us through our connection to Jesus Christ. The key is that phrase he uses over and over - "to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus"

Sainthood says much more about God's grace than our own skill or goodness. It is a received gift by grace through faith in Christ.

So if you examine those many Pauline letters in the New testament, you see something like 48 times the phrase, "in Christ Jesus" To be a saint is to be engrafted in Christ is an image he uses also.

Another beautiful image is that we put on a coat, and as we put that coat on and surround ourselves with it, God gives us the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I believe God would have us claim this gift as our own again today.

I love the story told some years back by the popular writer Tony Campolo. He was teaching this idea of sainthood of all believers, and he said, "Here's what we are going to do - every one introduce yourself to your neighbor, put the word Saint in front of it - so they went around the room - St. Anthony, I am St. Thomas, and then St. Jean and then St. Michael. And on it went. This was a fun exercise.

But one person came up to him after the class, and was not happy at all.. you can kind of understand why he did not care for it - his name was Bernard.

So what then ARE saints? Not only those through whom the light shines, but saints in a sense are conduits of God's Holy Spirit, and they transform the environment around them.

Saints walk among us here at Saint Mark. They do the work of God in many cases. OR they are ambassadors for Christ in places where they work and live. They teach, they care for our campus. They fold letters or count offerings. They go into our community and work for justice and care for creation. They glorify God with music, and countless other things.

They do none of these things to earn God's favor, but because they are in Christ. Saints are among us.

The problem with the stained-glass window saints is that none of us think we can measure up to that. If you

feel that way, Paul gives us some important ways to live into that gift- one key I have learned is the ministry of presence. That's very hard in these days of lack of presence, but it is saying: "I am willing to embody the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ wherever I am, to be present to people and embody the presence of Christ."

I mentioned last week the ability which God desires of us is availability.

The Letter to the Philippians shows one way in which Paul went about his ministry of presence, even virtually, in writing from a prison cell. In this scripture, Paul was all about the ministry of appreciation.

You might know that a popular trend in management courses looks into what they call the art of appreciation. That means in management whenever you wish to offer helpful criticism, wrap it in a word of encouragement, praise or appreciation, offer the criticism, then conclude with a word of appreciation.

I suppose the Apostle Paul had this insight thousands of years ago. His letters in the Bible are really just updates and encouragement to churches he planted. In his travels, a faith group would get started, then he would move on. This often got him into trouble with local authorities of course, and wound up beaten and imprisoned a few times.

But along the way he would get messages that one of his churches was in conflict, and he would write them a letter, and it would be read aloud in that congregation for all to hear. This is what Philippians is - a letter of joy and appreciation to a church that Paul loved very much - he begins it by writing "to all the saints who are in Christ Jesus", and then says to his church "every time I think of you, I think of you with joy."

So who has been a saint in your life? Not the stained glass window kind, but in everyday life has encouraged you, appreciated you, made you feel special?

On this All saints Day I remember an example of my own father, who had his own Industrial Sales company. When I was in college I would go with him to visit the big steel and chemical plants around Ohio and Pennsylvania. It was quite an eye opening experience. What I learned from him was how he treated every single person he encountered.

He stopped and chatted with the guard at the gate. He would compliment the secretary in the waiting room on how well she answered the phone. In sales training they say talk to the "decision makers", but that is not just what he did. He showed thanks and appreciation to all the guys in the pipe and machine shops, the guys who did the work.

By the time I was going on these trips he had been doing this for 15 years, and he would just walk into these huge plants and guys would practically stop what they were doing to yell hello or visit for a minute. Share a story or a joke. They loved him, and I found out how much when so many showed up for his memorial service many miles away from their homes.

What I learned was that by your presence, by showing appreciation, you can transform situations.

How might that be applicable here in the DC area as we brace for election day and week and what ever comes next?

Maybe you know the famous quote from Oliver Cromwell in England. He was in a national crisis. There was not

enough silver in the country to mint the currency, and the economy was in danger.

So he sent out his military with the orders find silver.

They returned discouraged and said, "Lord Cromwell, the only silver we found was in the statues of the saints in the church".:

And Cromwell says, "Good- then melt down the saints and put them back into circulation"

As God molds us and puts us back into circulation as saints in the world, not in stained glass, but wherever we are, we walk out into the world and claim this gift which God gives to us.

Saints are among us - can you see them?