

SERMON TITLE: "Who Is a Saint?"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 1:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 17, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Since it's St. Patrick's Day, I thought it might be good to focus our attention today on the topic of saints. After all, what constitutes a saint, or "Who is a saint?"

A few years ago when I was on a flight back to Salt Lake City from someplace, I was reading a book called *American Saint*. The passenger in the seat next to me asked me about the book. It turned out that my seat mate was a high level leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and, seeing the title, he was expecting the book to be about Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or one of those kind of "saints." When I told him that the book *American Saint* was about Francis Asbury, the great early leader of American Methodism, he was surprised. Yes, it's true. Even we Methodists have our saints—probably a lot more of them, and maybe a few less, than most people realize.

Take a story, for example, that goes back to the 1800s, when Methodist preachers traveled from church to church on horseback, and Methodism was growing by leaps and bounds across the country. On this one particular day, a certain bandit confronted one of those Methodist circuit riders and made him get off his horse. When the bandit started to rummage through the man's saddlebags, the preacher protested,

"You wouldn't rob a poor preacher, would you, sir?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the bandit. "I didn't realize you were a preacher. What kind of preacher are you?"

"I'm a Methodist," was the reply.

"Well, of course, I won't rob you then!" exclaimed the bandit. "After all, I'm a Methodist myself!"¹

It's pretty clear that just being associated with a certain church isn't what guarantees sainthood. But what does? Who is a saint, anyhow?

In Roman Catholic tradition, saints are persons who have been officially recognized as having performed one or more miracles. In New Orleans, Saints are persons who play professional football. For our purposes, though, I'm going to say that saints are somewhere in between. My dictionary says that a saint is "1) a holy person, 2) a person who is exceptionally meek, charitable, or patient, 3) saints are those holy persons who have died and are believed to be with God, or 4)—in the New Testament—any Christian."²

Did you hear that last definition? According to the New Testament, every Christian is a saint. So we can better understand that concept, let's take a look at how "saint" is explained in Ephesians, chapter one.

1—CHOSEN, ADOPTED, AND GRACED BY GOD

By applying Paul's letter to the Ephesians to ourselves, we see first that we are saints because of what **God** has done for us. In verse 4, we read that God "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." Before the world was ever created, God wanted to be in relationship with us. The root meaning of the Greek word for saint is *holy*. And the root meaning of *holy* is set apart, belonging to God. God chose us to belong to God. We are saints because God set us apart for a special purpose.

In verse five, Paul also says that God "destined us for adoption as God's children." Through God's only Son Jesus, we too have become sons and daughters of God. We who once were orphans without hope have been adopted by our benevolent, loving, and divine parent. We who once were not a people are now God's people (1 Peter 2:10). We are saints because God has welcomed us into God's family and adopted us as children.

In verses 6-8, Paul then adds that God has lavished glorious grace upon us. God freely bestowed on us mercy and kindness. We're saints not because of how hard we've worked to be righteous, but because of God's free gift of grace. According to Ephesians 1, saints are those persons whom **God** has chosen and adopted and to whom **God** has given the gift of grace.

2—REDEEMED, FORGIVEN, AND GATHERED BY CHRIST

In addition to what God has done on our behalf, Paul also lists what **Christ** has done to make us saints. Ephesians 1:7 says that, through Christ's blood, we have redemption. Through the human life, suffering, and death of Jesus, we are made right with God. We human beings are restored to our divine creator through Jesus' sacrificial life among us. Through his faithfulness to God's purposes even to the point of death on the cross, Jesus provided a redemptive act of salvation on our behalf.

Said another way, in Christ, we receive forgiveness. Our sins and trespasses, our mistakes and failures, our orneriness and ignorance are all removed. Our slate is wiped clean through Jesus. Because Jesus was human, he's able to understand us. Because he is divine, Jesus also has the capacity to forgive us. We are not saints because of what we do on our own. We're saints because we're forgiven by Christ.

But Christ's actions on our behalf don't end there. Verses 9-12 tell us that Christ is the mediator of God's will. In wisdom and insight, God used the incarnation of Christ to communicate to us human beings about the mystery of God's will and good pleasure. Christ is like a magnet that gathers us up. As we've already noted, God is eager to adopt us as children. But it is in and through **Christ** that we are able to receive the inheritance of the saints.

3—MARKED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul is quite Trinitarian in this passage of scripture. After he told us what *God* has done and what *Christ* has done, then he goes on to tell how the **Holy Spirit** plays a part in making us saints.

In verse 13, Paul writes that Christians are marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit shapes our new life in Christ and makes us God's own people. From other places in Paul's letters, we know that the Holy Spirit comforts us in times of grief and sadness. The Holy Spirit challenges us to grow in our faith. The Holy Spirit guides us when we are travelling along unknown paths. The Holy Spirit empowers us to overcome evil and to love other people. The Holy Spirit fills us

with talents and skills that we are to share with others in the church and community. We are saints because the Holy Spirit is continually transforming our lives individually and in the collective body, so that together, as “God’s own people,” we can “live for the praise of God’s glory” (1:12 & 14).

4—RESPONDED TO BY US

If you’re paying close attention to what I’m saying, you might have noticed a subtle shift in that last point. I began by saying that we’re saints because **God** has offered us acceptance and grace. And then we saw that we’re saints because we’ve been redeemed and forgiven by **Christ**. Then we noted that the **Holy Spirit**, the third person of the Divine Trinity, gets in on the act. To whatever degree we can be considered saintly, the bulk of the credit goes to God—first, second, and third. But this Letter to the Ephesians doesn’t stop there. The apostolic writer implies something more. Our one God—known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—freely and graciously adopts, inspires, and empowers us. But, at a fourth point, **we** are called upon to respond. God lavishes upon us the possibilities of saintliness, but eventually **we** have to accept the opportunity.

In the very first verse of this letter, notice that it was addressed to the saints in Ephesus, who were “faithful in Christ Jesus.” Being a saint isn’t simply a matter of receiving God’s free gifts. Being a saint also requires that we commit ourselves to God and do our best to be loyal disciples of Christ. Being a saint is an on-going challenge for us. Every day we must acknowledge our need for God’s mercy and try to live as God’s children, in accordance with God’s will and pleasure. We don’t have to be absolutely perfect to be a saint, but we do have to honor Jesus our Savior. We do have to follow the guidance of his example in love and mercy. We have to accept and cooperate with the power of the Holy Spirit to transform us into better people. We have to try to give God our best every day, so that—as Paul writes in verse 14—our lives really do generate praise for God’s glory.

CONCLUSION

There's a fun song about saints that we'll be singing a little later in the service. The lyrics go like this:

I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true,
 who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.
 And one was a doctor, and one was a queen, and one was a shepherdess on the green . . .
 And one was a soldier, and one was a priest, and one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
 And there's not any reason, no not the least, why I shouldn't be one too.

At first the lyrics seem a little exotic, like these saints are far away from us. But then the words say,

They lived not only in ages past; there are hundreds of thousands still.
 The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.
 You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store,
 in church by the sea, in the house next door; they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,
 and I mean to be one too.

Saints can be people who lived a long time ago or in a foreign place, like St. Patrick or Mother Theresa. Saints can be martyrs who die for their faith. But saints can also be regular people like you and me who have been adopted as God's children, forgiven by Christ, and marked by the power of the Holy Spirit. God the three-in-one has already done the heavy lifting. All that's left is for us to climb on board and join the faithful. Then there won't be any question about who is a saint.

¹Adapted from *Why Didn't Noah Swat Both Mosquitoes?* by Hoover Rupert, (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1994), p. 66.

² *New World Dictionary of the American Language*, 2nd College Ed., (Wm Collins Publishers, Inc: Cleveland, 1980), p. 1255.

³ *United Methodist Hymnal*, #712. Lyrics by Lesbia Scott, 1929.