

“Me, a Saint? Yeah, right!”

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Readings:

Ephesians 1:11-23

Good morning, it is a pleasure to be with you again to worship together and share God’s word.

If you are a parent, grand parent, teacher, or work with small kids in some way, this past week and next week might not be your favourite. School kids this past week were getting excited for Halloween, getting ready to dress up as a favourite character or superhero. All this extra excitement might have made it difficult to teach kids. And next week there is all that extra candy in their systems. Good luck with that.

Now that my kids are almost grown up, I enjoy Halloween in a different way. Not only because I always buy extra candy -- no one wants to run out of candy -- but is fun to see the excitement of the kids and see what costumes they wear. Especially the really little ones, who can barely walk up the steps, with their little plastic pumpkins. You put candy in their pumpkins, and they look back at their parents in disbelief, they can’t believe that

strangers are giving them candy and its okay with their parents. It's a topsy turvy world, for at least one day.

As you probably know, Halloween has a connection to Christian traditions. Halloween is the eve of All Saints Day, which is on Nov 1. The day before All saints day became associated with remembering those that have died. In western countries this gradually developed into a time to dress up in costumes, trick or treat, and celebrate being spooky – whatever that means.

But there is also a parallel between the costumes that the kids wear and Christian saints. Depending on which Marvel or DC movie is most recent, superheroes are always a big hit. This year I saw a few more supermen than usual.

Some Christian traditions have looked at saints as heroes in the faith. Individuals who have done remarkable things for the church or the world. They seem elevated beyond what most of us can do, super Christians if you will. In some traditions, believers are encouraged to pray to saints, as it is believed that saints will intercede on their behalf. While it is important to remember the lies of

Christians from the past, Protestants broke with this tradition since it does not have biblical support.

But sometimes protestants struggle with saints and holiness in a different way. Personally, I have found the language of holiness and sanctification challenging. How I am, a finite and fragile creature suppose to fulfill the will of a holy and just God. Especially when I was younger, I felt that I could never measure up to the requirements of God's holiness. Sometimes God felt distant and judgemental. I certainly identified with Paul in Romans 7: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." As fragile, finite, sinful creatures, how can we actually live holy lives (?). Me, as saint! Yeah, right!

But in Ephesians, the apostle Paul disagrees with these interpretations. He thinks that believers like you and I can be called saints. At least seven times in the letter he uses the term "saints". Sometimes he is talking about Israel, sometimes specific individuals, and other times he calls the believers in Ephesus "saints". And we find this in other letters of Paul as well, in Roman and Corinthians for example.

What is more, if you read the letters of Paul you will know that these believers were not “superheors” of the faith. They did not perfectly fulfill God’s will, obeying everything commanded of them. They struggled with greed, division, lust, anger, bad language, and were distracted by false teachers – just to name a few things! They often missed the mark.

But he called them saints. What is going on here? What are the actual characteristics or marks of being a saint? There might be more, but I want to highlight at least four marks of a saint in Ephesians.

1. Saints Say “Yes” to God

In chapter 4, Paul pleads with his readers “to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”. Or in our reading in chapter 1, “In him also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (v. 13). Saints are called by God and believe in faith. They say “Yes” to God.

Some say this is at the root of the meaning of the word saint: “to be set part for God”. And if you are

set part then you have answered the voice of God nudging you at some point.

You may have been baptized as an infant, grew up in the church, and confirmed as a young adult. Or, you may have come to faith later in life. It could have been a dramatic conversion, or a slow longer process. Last week in Montreal I had the privilege of being a part of a baptism of an old friend, who got baptised in his 50s. When he gave his short testimony during the baptism he was a little embarrassed that he was getting baptism as a adult. But the timing doesn't matter, it just matters that you said yes to God.

The fact that you are here this morning is a sign that you are a saint. With this colder weather it might be tempting to stay in bed on a Sunday morning, for extra sleep. But you responded, said yes to coming to worship with God, meeting with other believers.

2. Saints Do their Part to build Christian Community

Again, in chapter 4, it states that that there are diverse gifts in the church but the purpose of these gifts is “building up the body of Christ”. This is a

constant theme in Paul and other NT writers. Christians communities need people with different gifts that can be used. This includes not just public things like preaching, teaching, and leading worship, but gifts of visitation, prayer, mentoring, administration, organizing, financial giving. All of these things, and more, are necessary for a healthy Christian community.

I think this is one of the things Presbyterians realize more than other denominations. No system is perfect, but Presbyterian churches have a session which spreads out the ministry of a church and calls on different people to use their gifts. Pastors are “teaching elders” among other elders responsible for the life of the community. And other structures of the Presbyterian church in Canada above local churches takes this idea of sharing responsibility seriously. In my work with the college, I go to GA of PCC every year and I am struck by the fact that half of the people there are lay people using their gifts for the church. Praise God for that.

Of course, you do not need to be on the session or in formal leadership to build up the Christian community. Anytime you respond to a need, see a chance to love others, to create unity, you are

doing the work of a saint in building up the body of Christ.

3. Saints Need models of Christian faith, and become models

In chapter 3, Paul talks about his own calling and ministry to the gentles. He mentions that he is writing from prison, probably in Rome, when he passes on this letter. He recounts how God revealed the plan of salvation to him, the plan centered on Jesus Christ. He then recounts how God called him to minister to the gentles. He is putting up his life as a model of Christian faith.

In Corinthians he is more direct: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1). And in Phil 4:9, he stats: “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Paul is not bragging. He is not saying, look at me, I am a super Christian. In fact, he looks at himself as least among “the saints”. He is saying that we need models of what it means to live Christian lives. Christian life is not just based on ideas. It is a personal reality. In fact, God is personal, and God calls people into relationship with himself. We are

called to live in relationship with others, in community. We need to see Jesus modeled in the lives of others.

4. Saints Know that Jesus Christ is holy (only he fulfills God's will perfectly)

All throughout this letter, there is constant reference to what Christ has accomplished. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the will of God. Earlier in chapter 1 says that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love”. And as our reading summarized, it is only through the death, resurrection, and lordship of Christ over the church that we receive salvation and blessings from God (v. 20-23).

God desires that humans obey his will, in a way that fulfills the covenant and law originally made with Israel. The good news is that this has occurred. Jesus Christ, as a human, has fulfilled the covenant and law with God. And Jesus Christ, who is also God, invites us into this holy and restored relationship with God. In faith, by the Holy Spirit, we come into this holy relationship with God. We are saints because Jesus Christ is the Holy one, the

great high priest who connects us with God. And like young trick or treaters with their plastic pumpkins, we can respond with surprise, delight, and joy to his gift of holiness.

Growing up, did you have a favourite relative? A cool uncle or aunt that you looked up to when you were younger? Growing up my favourite relative was my uncle Laurie. He was my dad's youngest brother. He was sporty, funny, wasn't too old to hang out with his nieces and nephews. He gave me my first baseball glove, which I still have. I was a ring bearer at his wedding, and he gave me a little hunting knife as a thank you gift. As a teenager he gave me some cassette tapes of his favourite bands. He even helped me out when I was learning to play guitar.

But he was also important in the formation of my Christian faith. In conversations, he often encouraged me and sometimes corrected me. He took me to youth events and concerts. Was he perfect, of course not. Do we agree on everything, no. But he modeled Christian faith for me.

When I look back on our relationship, it is not so much the specific things he said that stuck with me

but how he modeled the life of Christ. His life had Christ-like patterns of self-giving love, humility, concern for others, obedience to the Spirit. In the small ways he served others. I noticed how he parented, even how he served others first at the dinner table. How he dealt with the struggles of life, finding strength in God's presence.

His life and example remind me of the song "My Hero" from the band the Foo Fighters. Dave Grohl, the lead singer of the band, explains that the song is about the people that he really looks up to. Not celebrities and rock stars but everyday people who go about their lives, doing really good things. The first verse and chorus read:

"Don't the best of them bleed it out?

While the rest of them peter out

Truth or consequence, say it aloud

Use that evidence, race it around

There goes my hero

Watch him as he goes

There goes my hero

He's ordinary"

In Ephesians, Paul is under no illusion that these new gentile believers will have it all figured out. But

he still calls them saints. He calls believers to be ordinary saints.

The church doesn't need more super Christians, saints we pray to, saints who do things that seem to out of reach for the rest of us. But as protestants we might also have to realize that becoming holy, becoming ordinary saints, is not far off. It is within reach because God is with us (Emmanuel). The holy God meets us in Jesus Christ, in the life of the church, and in our individual lives. We become holy as we attached ourselves to the life of Jesus Christ, when we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, when we do our part to love others, in the church and in the world. As we do this, we become ordinary saints.

The challenge for us, then, is straightforward.

Have you said Yes to God? Do you continually say yes to God?

Do you do your part to build up the Christian community in love? Do you do your best to love family, friends, or people you encounter at work or school?

Do you have models of Christian faith? And as you grown and live out the faith, why not become a model for someone else?

And lastly, know that the perfect life that God the Father desires has occurred in Jesus. And we participate in his holy life as we are guided by the Spirit in the church and in our daily lives.

May God grant us the grace to live into our calling to be ordinary saints. Amen.