

Saint-ish

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
November 5, 2017—All Saints Sunday

- 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 48-50 ⁴²This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when raised, it will be immortal. ⁴³When buried, it is ugly and weak; when raised, it will be beautiful and strong. ⁴⁴When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body. There is, of course, a physical body, so there has to be a spiritual body.... ⁴⁸Those who belong to the earth are like the one who was made of earth; those who are of heaven are like the one who came from heaven. ⁴⁹Just as we wear the likeness of the man made of earth, so we will wear^[c] the likeness of the Man from heaven. ⁵⁰What I mean, friends, is that what is made of flesh and blood cannot share in God's Kingdom, and what is mortal cannot possess immortality. (Good News Translation)
- Revelation 21:1-6a Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. ² And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. ³ I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: "Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. ⁴ He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared." ⁵ Then the one who sits on the throne said, "And now I make all things new!" He also said to me, "Write this, because these words are true and can be trusted." ⁶ And he said, "It is done! I am the first and the last, the beginning and the end. (Good News Translation)
- Theme: Though we are, at best, "saint-ish" in this life, we are called to do better and be better until God perfects us in our eternal life among the communion of saints.

Heavenly Father, lift us up. In Jesus your Son, show us how to live for you and not for ourselves only. In the power of your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

When we join our voices to recite the Apostles' Creed and speak the words, "I believe in the communion of saints," what are we saying? What do we mean? What do we believe?

If there were Catholic kids in your neighborhood when you were growing up, you might have wondered about all the "saints" they always seemed to be engaged with. Beyond St. Patrick's Day, of course, you might have heard them say that they were going to church because it was St. So-and-So's Day. And when you asked your Protestant parents, "Who are all these saints? And how come we don't have saints?" the answer you may have heard was, "Catholics have saints. We Protestants don't."

If you were led to believe that Protestants don't have saints, that wouldn't be entirely accurate. For instance, though the populations of both Wales and Scotland are largely Protestant now, the Welsh cherish the example of St. David, a 6th century priest of the Roman Church in Wales, and the Scots revere the apostle St. Andrew. They even named a town, a university and the first golf course after St. Andrew. We Protestants revere sainted figures of history; just not as many as our Catholic friends.

There is a difference between a Protestant and Roman Catholic approach to hagiology (that's means "having to do with saints"). I apologize that this is a major simplification, but

Catholics believe that people need to access sources of grace (such as through participation in various church rituals) in order to make themselves worthy of God's salvation. Naturally, sainted figures in church history are a bountiful source of excess grace. So revering a saint is an effective way to build up "spiritual credit." It's a misconception to say that Catholics pray *to* saints, though. They pray to the Holy Trinity *through* the saints, in the same way that we might ask others to pray *for* us.

We Protestants embrace a different approach to sainthood. First, we think of all the souls who have gone before us – those who were dear to us as well as generations far, far removed from us. Hebrews Chapter 12 presents a wonderful image for us in describing all those dear, departed souls: it says that "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."¹ All those having gone before us who strove to be faithful – old and young, powerful or humble – we think of them as "saints."

But we have yet another way that we think of saints. We follow the lead of the Apostle Paul, who when addressing the Christian communities in his letters named the believers saints in nearly every church:

- 2 Cor 1:1: with all the saints who are in all [the province of] Achaia...
- Rom 1:7: To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints...
- Phil 1:1: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...
- Col 1:2: To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae...
- Eph 1:1: To the saints who are in Ephesus....²

Yes, Paul would probably write, "To the saints who are in Rocky River...." We are considered saints, too.

Now, if that makes you a little uneasy, that's not all bad. We *should* strive toward a greater degree of Christ-like conduct in our daily actions and thoughts. But our human nature assures us that we will fall short of that goal.

In an online devotional this week a New Hampshire pastor named Emily Heath reflected on our challenge of aspiring to saintliness while living in the nitty-gritty of this world. I liked that for the day after his famous 500th anniversary, Pastor Heath began her blog by referencing Martin Luther. Listen to Pastor Heath's words:

Martin Luther famously said that while we live we are all simultaneously saints and sinners. We are imperfect and messy, prone to doing all the wrong things, and completely hapless. And yet, we are also the beloved children of God, trying every day to get it just a little more right. In other words, we are human beings who are alive.

Protestants believe something else, too. We believe that when we die we join the Communion of Saints. Far from a club for people who lived perfect lives, or believed without doubt, sainthood is a state achieved not by works but by dying in the hope of Christ's grace and love.

That means that one day we will all be saints. For now, though, we are simply saints-in-training. Like any other learners, we will often get it wrong. We will stumble and cause pain. We will behave in decidedly un-saintlike ways. And yet, we will continue to move forward, closer to sainthood with each breath.³

¹ from Hebrews 12:1 New Revised Standard Version

² <http://www.letusreason.org/Biblexp45.htm>, accessed 11/2/2017

³ "Saints-in-Training" by Emily C. Heath. *Still Speaking Daily Devotional*, November 1, 2017. United Church of Christ. Emily C. Heath is the Senior Pastor of the Congregational Church in Exeter, New Hampshire, and the author of *Glorify: Reclaiming the*

So we are saints, but not perfect ones. In this life we're sort of "saint-ish." Yes, we are already loved and accepted by God, but still God calls us to try to be better and do better.

- Perhaps we strive to model kindness and patience in the way we interact not only with strangers, but with colleagues and friends and even our own families.
- Maybe we try to be better and do better by exploring an attitude of thankfulness, discovering the joy that comes from being generous, and loving that joy.
- Maybe we simply remind ourselves repeatedly to keep an eye out for signs that God is present in the activities of our everyday lives.
- Perhaps we try to do better at standing up for people who are being taken advantage of, whether by ingrained tradition or institutional policies or offensive behavior happening right in front of us.
- As you have done today, we may strive to do better at devoting ourselves to acknowledging and praising God in acts of worship, so that our daily lives are more likely to serve God's purposes and not just our own purposes.

Just because we're only "saint-ish" in this life, by God's grace we can have greater intentions for ourselves.

And as for others... what about those who have preceded us in death? By faith we know that God has perfected those who have gone before us – they are now "saints" in "so great a cloud of witnesses." Our God of mercy and forgiveness has perfected them:

- Yes, even their quirks that once amused but then annoyed us...
- What they did to disappoint or betray or abandon or scar us...
- The divide that remained because of those important words we meant to say but never did...

All that has been healed, forgiven, perfected. God has perfected even what we cherished about those saints who were our beloved.

There will come a day when every tear this life brings will be wiped away, and fear will be no more. On that day sainthood will be less joyless perfection and more a celebration of God's grace and goodness. Maybe for those of us who are on this side of sainthood that means that today is a great day to start practicing joy.⁴

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⁴ Ibid.