

A man tells the story of a friend of his who explained to a Protestant class about the meaning of All Saints Day. A student abruptly stood up and replied, “Protestants don’t have saints!” (Who is with the student?) The professor, in a moment of quick wit, ran to his office to grab a phonebook (that tells us the age of the story), and he asked the student to read the names of all the churches in the area. The student read, “St. James Baptist, St. John’s Lutheran, John Knox Presbyterian,” until he gave up and said, “I get it... I am wrong!”

It became obvious to the student, and to the whole class, that the church, the body of Christ, is filled with saints; those who are passed and have gone on before us, and those who are living and walking among us today, and if we think along with the apostle Paul (Colossians 1:9-14), perhaps even we ourselves are saints.

All Saints Day reminds us that the association of saint is not only reserved for the greats of history. Paul uses the term saint synonymously with Christian or believer, suggesting that we too are members of a great cloud of witnesses from every generation who have acted in great and small ways to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. The “saints of God” are those who have led particularly holy lives. The Greek word translated as “saints” means “holy” or “set apart” for God’s use. It is not a designation one can earn but is a gift from God to those who follow Jesus as the Christ, Jesus as Lord.

“I have sung Lesbia Scott’s hymn, *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, all my life. From childhood, the idea that “the saints of God” are just folk like us and can show up anywhere stuck with me. And one was a doctor... a queen, a shepherdess on the green, a soldier, a priest, and more; we meet them in school, in lanes, at sea, in church, in trains, in shops, at tea. A saint is someone who has demonstrated mighty deeds of God, ... those who live out kindness and compassion in daily life.”

Elizabeth Ring, Building Faith, “We Sing a Song of the Saints of God: Teaching All Saints and All Souls”, October 2013

- Can you think of a doctor or nurse that has been especially kind and helpful?
- How about a public figure that has stood out as a servant leader?
- Who do you know that is a “shepherdess”? This could lead to conversations about animal caretakers and caregivers of all kinds.
- Have you ever heard stories about a soldier, or do you know a soldier, who is courageous and sacrificial in their service?
- Have any church leaders ever shown compassion?
- Have your parents, and other relatives, teachers, babysitters, and anyone else been just the right person in a particular moment; like a guardian angel?

I would like to offer a reading now from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and invite you to reflect on the words offered by Jesus. Think to yourself whether these words are ways in which you would describe or define that of a saint?

Read Matthew 5:3-12

Poor in Spirit: *"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.*

Mourn: *"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

Meek: *"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

Hungry and Thirsty: *"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

Merciful: *"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full,' you find yourselves cared for.*

Pure in Heart: *"You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

Peacemaker: *"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.*

Persecuted for Righteousness Sake: *"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.*

"Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

What do you think? Is a saint poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, maker of peace, persecuted for righteousness' sake? Jesus says yes. What do you think?

On the one hand, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is forthcoming in the characteristics we are to strive for in life, including the words immediately following the beatitudes, "you are the salt of the earth (vs. 13)" and "you are the light of the world (vs. 14-16)." These describe what it means to be a blessing to others (and we learn from Jesus' teachings as well that being a blessing to others is being a blessing to God). On the other hand, these words from Jesus highlight the good news that God is a God of blessing; meaning one cannot accomplish these things on one's own but only through the power and strength and love of being blessed by God. From the beginning, God has blessed all God's children with the power and strength and love needed by all, and God continues to bless today. The good news for us, in line with God's faithfulness, is that God's promise of blessing is steadfast and enduring for eternity.

My dad has shared several times the story of a class of elementary students who were taken into the sanctuary of their church to look at the beautiful stained glass windows depicting scenes from the Bible and church history. We have those stained-glass windows in our sanctuary and our Confirmation class does this. We even have a book describing them all. Anyway, the teacher asked the students who a saint was. At that moment a beam of sun light shone through one of the windows and a student responded: "A saint is one through whom the light of God shines."

Yes. Yes. Yes. That is Awesome! Saints are those who let the light of God's love, grace, and mercy shine through their lives. Saints are those who have been blessed by God and are in turn a blessing to others.

I would like to close today with a poem entitled "HOLES", which I feel captures the journey of being a saint and the necessity of being blessed and a blessing.

*I had been in that hole for a very long time
In the dark and the damp, in the cold and the slime.
The shaft was above me; I could see it quite clear
But there's no way I ever could reach it from here.
Nor could I remember the world way up there
So I lost all my hope and gave in to despair.
I knew nothing but darkness, the floor, and the walls
Then off in the distance I heard someone call:
"Get up! Get ready! There's nothing the matter.
Take rocks and old sticks and build up a fine ladder."

This had never occurred to me-- had not crossed my mind.
But I started to stack all the stones I could find.
When I ran out of stones, then old sticks were my goal,
For one way or another I'd get out of that hole.
So I soon had a ladder that was sturdy and tall*

*And I thought, "I'll soon leave this place once and for all."
I climbed up my ladder. It was no easy chore,
For from lifting those boulders, my shoulders were sore.
I climbed on up the ladder, but soon had to stop
For my ladder stopped short-- some ten feet from the top.*

*I climbed back down my ladder and started to cry
I'd done all I could do. I gave my best try.
And in spite of my work, in this hole I must die.
And all I could do was to sit and think, "Why?"
Was my ladder too short? Or my hole much too deep
Then from way upon high came a voice, "Do not weep."
And then faith, hope, and love entered into my chest
As the voice said to me that I'd done my best.*

*He said, "You've worked very hard, and your labor's been rough,
But the ladder you've built is at last tall enough.
Do not despair. You have reason to hope.
Just climb up your ladder; I'll throw down my rope."
I climbed up the ladder, then climbed up the cord.
When I got to the top, there stood the Lord.
I couldn't be happier; my struggle was done.
I blinked in the brightness that came from the Son.*

*I fell to the ground, His feet did I kiss
I cried, "What can I do to repay thee for this?"
Then He looked all about Him. There were holes in the ground
They had people inside, and were seen all around
There were thousands of holes that were damp, dark, and deep
Then the Lord turned to me and He said, "Feed my sheep."*

*Then He went on His way to help other lost souls,
And I got right to work, calling down to the holes:
"Get up! Get ready! There's nothing the matter.
Take rocks and old sticks and build up a fine ladder."*

*It now was my turn to spread the good word.
The most glorious message that man ever heard.
That there's one who is willing to save one and all
And we've got to be ready when He gives the call.
He'll pull us all out of the hole that we're in
And save all our souls from death and from sin.
So do not lose faith; there is reason to hope
Just build up your ladder; He'll throw down His rope.*