

“How Well Do We Know Our Saints?”
Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18; Ephesians 1:11–23; Luke 6:20–31
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I will never forget a conversation I had on a Friday night of my freshman year in college. I had my door open and was playing my guitar while sipping on my usual college beverage — believe it or not, a cup of Earl Grey tea. A parent-age man walked down the hallway and knocked repeatedly on the door across the hall. When no one came to the door, I said, “If you are looking for Todd Struttman, if he is not in his room studying, he is probably at the library studying. Todd is always studying.” The man looked at me and replied, “Well, some people have objectives in life,” and then walked away.

I said nothing, but I could not hide my irritation. I had objectives in life. I was an honors student and a merit scholar who studied all the time too. My academic ego was deeply offended. I was simply trying to insert a bit of levity, but the man obviously did not have a sense of humor, which was ironic because, as I learned later from Todd, his name was Hilarious. I don’t mean his name was funny, I mean his name was — Hilarious! His family was Catholic and he was born on the day of Saint Hilary. They didn’t realize this fourth-century saint was a man and thought Hilary was a female name and thus named their son Hilarious...

My friend and I had a lot of fun with the story, and it prods me to wonder, “How well do we know our saints?” These good Catholic folk didn’t know theirs very well. Do we? We may say we don’t have saints in the sense the Catholic church does, formally recognized faithful people, but we do; whether we call them saints or not, we do.

In Baptist life, we have John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong, and many others. In this church, we have Thomas Skinner and John Lewis, Fannie Heck and Sallie Bailey Jones, Jim Graham and Mabel Claire Maddrey. You will notice that I have not named anyone with living connections in this church now because I am not a fool. I would inevitably leave out someone significant. But we

can all think of those people who were saints in our minds, the best of what it means to be Jesus People, and we can think of some living now.

But do we recognize all the right people? How well do we know our saints? Do we even know what a saint is? We think of saints as virtuous people, though we define virtue in different ways, but what is a saint in scripture? The reading from Daniel refers to the holy ones of the Most High. The Hebrew is *qadosh* which does not mean “virtuous” but rather “set apart.” Here it refers to faithful Jewish people who have kept the covenant in difficult times and thus lived lives set apart for God’s glory. Before we join the narrative from Ephesians, the author refers to saints who are in Ephesus. The Greek word *hagios* also refers to those “set apart” to a different life. This means the life Jesus calls us to and makes possible, and it refers to all his followers, not just a select few.

But what exactly does this life entail? Following Jesus in a path of service and sacrificial love, loving God and neighbor, seeking righteousness, pursuing justice, making peace. These are things Jesus talks about over and over again as he calls people to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. It is an invitation for all his followers, but it can be a tough pill to swallow.

Consider our reading from Luke. Here Jesus says blessed are the poor and hungry and those who grieve while cursed are the rich and well-fed and those who laugh. It’s no wonder we talk more often about Matthew’s beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. These words from the Sermon on the Plain are more challenging, and while we may not be called to take them literally and give away all we have, this is not the only time Jesus talks about poverty and wealth. He does so often.

In recent times, leaders from a certain perspective have warned people not to go to churches that use the terms “social justice” or “economic justice” because they come from a “leftist ideology.” They come from the Bible. They come from Jesus. Those who want to avoid them should find a church that doesn’t read the Bible or talk about Jesus. Jesus repeatedly calls us to help the poor and oppressed.

And as we read on in Luke, it doesn’t get any easier. “But I say to you who are listening:” Jesus continues, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who

mistreat you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who asks of you, and if anyone takes away what is yours, do not ask for it back again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Whew!

When I said the calling to a different life was extended to everyone, you may have thought that opened the door too wide. Well, *this* is the calling that extends to everyone, to follow in this pattern of life – helping the poor, loving our enemies, refusing to seek vengeance but rather seeking good for those who harm us. How many takers does Jesus have on this calling today, even in the church that claims his name? How many of us aspire to all that this involves?

And yet, it is not an all-or-nothing proposal. Perfection is not required or attained by anyone. It’s about seeking with all we have and are this different way in the context of grace. Theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues that Christians cannot try to become saints, nor are saints heroes and heroines of faith. They are “people like us who have been made more than we are by being engrafted into God’s kingdom that is ruled by forgiveness and love (*Unleashing the Scriptures from Captivity to America*, pp, 101-102).”

We don’t try to become saints. Doing so would be like Jewish New Testament professor Amy-Jill Levine saying as a child she wanted to become pope when she grew up. “I am not a saint,” most of us will say. In fact, if someone says otherwise, don’t believe them! But we are called to seek a better life, to follow Jesus with all our hearts, no matter how imperfectly, and that is what it means to be a saint in biblical terms.

As we gathered to ordain Lynn Lingafelt last Sunday, there was a warm spirit in this room, as we knew there would be. I told someone I didn’t think Jesus would get as big a crowd on a Sunday night... but Jesus could be tough. Lynn is always sweet. Few of us would have any trouble naming her a saint. But during the laying on of hands, just before I offered a last word of blessing, Rodney jumped in front of me because despite trying to resist, he couldn’t help but join in and offer a blessing. If it had been any of us, forget it! But since it was Lynn... Yet Rodney too was and is a saint, as was everyone else in the room.

So, this is who saints are — all who seek to follow Jesus, all who are set apart in God’s grace for a different path. But there is one other dimension of sainthood we need to name, especially on All Saints Day. Saints are those set apart not just here and now but in all times and places, and all these saints are with us in spirit when we gather.

Our stewardship team reminds us of our heritage which encourages and challenges us, but we have more than a memory of saints who shaped this church. The author of Hebrews lists the faithful and says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely and run with perseverance the race that has been set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1–2).” We have a great cloud of witnesses here now in spirit, cheering us on!

The Orthodox church takes this seriously and portrays images of saints all over their sanctuaries. I think of the Church of Saint Gabriel in Nazareth. It seems crowded, even when no one is there, because there are so many images. Baptists like simplicity and worry about people worshiping images rather than the God to whom they point. But what if we had images of our saints spread all around us to remind us of our heritage and help us realize they are cheering us on? We have some in the gathering room. Today we celebrate all the saints who are here now.

There is a story about an English minister who served a small congregation and liked to administer the sacrament at the end of evening services. One night so few people stayed that he considered not having communion but decided to proceed. In the midst of the liturgy, he read the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving which says, “Therefore, with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven...” Noting these words, he stopped and prayed, “God forgive me. I did not realize I was in such company (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, p. 231).”

We are never alone here. God is always present, as is a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on, saints of all times and places. May we find encouragement in this reality and in our understanding of what a saint really is, who saints are, people just like us.