

## SAINTS

Today we are celebrating All Saints' Day. This is the day we remember all those who have passed on from this life to life eternal. This past week when I mentioned to a couple of individuals that we would be celebrating All Saints this Sunday, in both cases the response was that they knew of someone who had died this past year, but they weren't sure as to whether or not the individual would be considered a Saint. So my question to all of us this morning is: when someone mentions the word "saint", what image comes to our mind? Maybe we think about some saints we have read about in books. What I am referring to are people in history who have done great things for God and maybe even performed some type of miracle. Maybe statues of saints come to mind like those in the Roman Catholic Church or cemeteries.

Our church or congregation is named after a saint. We are called St. James UMC. If we take a closer look at James' life maybe we can determine what made him a saint. When Jesus called James and his brother John, without argument or discussion they left their boat and even their father and followed Jesus. It appears that all those who follow Jesus or accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior are saints. Today's scripture from the First Letter of John reminds us that when we accept God's love through Jesus Christ, we are called "children of God" – saints. A person becomes a saint through the love of God. As God's children, we have worth beyond this world, but being a child of God is not some distant or future state; we are God's children here and now. As God's children we live differently, following the example of Jesus.

James was chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve apostles, given the mission to proclaim the good news, and authority to heal and cast our demons. To be named one of the twelve, James must have had faith and commitment which is probably why he is considered a saint. Yet we need to remember that it was James and John that showed their lack of understanding of their friend and Lord when he was turned away by Samaritans. They wanted their newfound authority as apostles not to heal but to bring fire down on the town. Jesus did reprimand them for their unforgiving, vengeful view of their power. Regardless, it was still James, Peter and John that Jesus chose to join him in prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane for his final prayer before his arrest. It must have hurt Jesus that the three of them fell asleep on this agonizing evening.

God's saints are those who will be the first to admit they are far from the mark because those who live closest to Christ disclaim resemblance to the goodness, love and compassion of the Christ they follow.

Our founder, John Wesley and George Whitfield were good friends, but they disagreed strongly on a number of points ... slavery and theology to name two. Wesley opposed slavery at every point and Whitfield did not. Wesley preached free grace for all; all may be saved and Whitfield was a strict Calvinist. Whitfield believed that salvation was for the elect, and only for the elect. Someone once asked Whitfield if we would see John Wesley in heaven. Whitfield's response was: No, Wesley will be so near the throne of grace and we so far away, we will not see Wesley in heaven.

So how can we tell if someone is a saint? Today's gospel reading from the book of Matthew gives us an outline for Christ-like living. It begins with recognition of one's poverty of spirit. Augustine taught us that pride is the first of the deadly sins. From pride all other sins flow. When an individual comes face to face with that individual's need, that person is in a position to grow, to change. Who is the helpless student? The one who thinks he or she knows everything. Socrates once stated that a teacher's first obligation is to bring the student from unconscious ignorance to conscious ignorance. Admission of poverty of spirit is simply admission of spiritual ignorance, and only then does one become teachable. At the outset of today's gospel reading it states that as Jesus' disciples came to him he began to speak and TAUGHT them. Saints have a teachable spirit. Saints aren't perfect, but on the road or what we call "going onto perfection". We might say that a saint is a work in progress.

This process of becoming a perfect reflection of Christ will take us all of our days on earth until one day when we see God face to face. If this is our hope and our destiny, then we will do all in our power to make ourselves ready: "All who have this hope in him purify themselves" (3:3).

Another saint, the Apostle Paul, talks about his own process of becoming all that God wants him to be:

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own;

but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

Earlier I spoke of this as a journey, but Paul refers to it as a race in 2 Timothy. All Saints Sunday reminds us of the saints along that race course who encourage us and cheer us on. We are truly surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

On this day we are invited to remember all those who have entered “the Church Triumphant” regardless of whether they died during this past year or some time ago. Remember that they are still with us. They surround us each and every day. As we journey or travel this road of life, striving to become what God wants us to be, know that we are not alone. Standing along that path is a great cloud of witnesses, and they are cheering us on. May all persevere until the day when we see Jesus and our loved ones face to face. Amen.