

“WALKING IN LOVE”

Matthew 5:1-10; Philippians 1:1-11
November 7, 2021 ~ All Saints Sunday
Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

I wonder how the congregation at Philippi reacted when they heard how Paul greeted them in this letter. I can imagine them gathered around, listening as somebody, an elder perhaps, read it aloud. “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” I wonder if they said, as we might, “Oh, no, not us. Not me. I’m no saint.”

I wonder why we react this way. Is it simply humility – an unwillingness to claim for ourselves any sort of holiness or perfection that we know (only too well) we don’t possess? Is the truth that we’re hoping to postpone being “saints” for a while, because we have a few vices and faults we want to hold on to a while longer? Is it maybe that we really don’t want to be saints because we have this sneaking suspicion that saints are kind of boring and don’t have much fun? Are we thinking that “saintliness” is reserved for a few – very few – particularly holy, wise, and unselfish folks (though we know that’s not how our Protestant tradition understands it)? Does being a saint sound like it might be too hard or demanding? Are we afraid of what might be asked of us, if we don’t back away from that name?

I think we get just a little bit anxious around this notion of “saints.” We’re ok with it, of course, to refer to those beloved folks gone before us into eternity, whose presence has left us with a deep sense of loss and absence, as well as appreciation for their gifts. But for ourselves, we’re just not so sure about it.

I don't know if the Christians at Philippi felt that way too, but if they did want to shy away from being called "saints," maybe the rest of what Paul had to say pulled them back in.

It becomes clear, as you read on from the salutation, that when Paul uses the word "saints," he isn't thinking of people who've arrived at some kind of perfection in their life of faith. In fact, he talks about the work that God has *begun* in them. He prays for them to grow in love and knowledge and goodness. And his message to them begins with "grace and peace" – with a *blessing*.

As Jerry mentioned last week, Paul has a close and loving bond with this particular community of faith. You hear his affection for them in every line. These men and women have shared in the work of building the church with him, and supported him in his imprisonment. He's had his struggles and his ups and downs, as they have. What we see here isn't a clique of people who've set themselves apart as extra-holy, but a relationship of mutual caring among folks who are still on the journey, whose faith still has room to grow.

And that word, "saints," which can also be translated as "holy ones"? The meaning of the Greek word is something like "set apart" or "dedicated to a particular purpose" or "special" in the sense that certain objects might be reserved for holy uses, like a communion chalice, perhaps. It refers not to any achieved holiness on the part of the Philippian Christians, but to God's having claimed them as God's people. To the fact that they are beloved of God.

The idea of saints as people who live lives of Christian purpose, and compassion, and spiritual awareness, and even a certain holiness isn't wrong... but it's secondary to the belovedness. It's not the *reason* we are beloved of God; it's possible *because* we are beloved.

What if every day we remembered that we are saints, *just because God claims us*? Take that a little further: what if we practiced seeing each other that way, too, like Paul saw his friends at Philippi? What if we blessed each other with "grace," and "peace," with reminders that we don't have to be anxious about whether we are good enough, whether we are *doing* enough. What if we remembered that wherever we go, we are walking in love – that is, within, *surrounded by*, the love of God? What if we understood that God's saints aren't those people who have already arrived, but those who are on the journey together?

Then, what if we not only could get a bit more comfortable with the notion of ourselves as saints, but looked beyond ourselves and our circle - people we already love - to others?

My friend and colleague, Pastor Ruth Moerdyk, shared a poem she wrote last week for All Saints day that gave me a different way of thinking about this notion of "sainthood." It's called "All Saints." The poem paints little word pictures of people, ordinary people, who we might not immediately name as saints: Teenagers whose impatience with hypocrisy we would probably call rude. A dying person planting crocuses. A teacher tying a child's shoe. A tattoo artist. A street person sharing his food with a dog. A nursing aide. A mischievous child. Ruth's poem gives praise for these, and people like them – "imperfect portals of light," she calls them. Can there be a better definition of a saint than that? What a difference it could make when we look at the

people around us, if we consider that each one might be, in some way we can't readily discern, an imperfect portal of the light of God!

The weary cashier trying to be patient with the customer who doesn't have quite enough money.

The customer trying to put together a nice meal for a spouse's birthday on a shoestring.

The neighbors who take turns walking her dog for a woman recovering from surgery.

The new neighbors who seem slow to respond to friendly overtures.

The college student rethinking things he always believed.

The person of color whose anger over a racist stereotype is evident.

The coworker who talks to everyone.

The friend whose depression makes you feel a little guilty about your happy life.

The friend whose seemingly-altogether life makes you feel jealous and a bit of a mess.

The family member who keeps making choices you wouldn't make.

The people in your life who seem to be always wanting you to learn some new technology.

The ER doctor who is rushed because there are too many patients to see.

The young parents trying hard to do everything right.

The guy who devotes most of his spare time to some quirky hobby you don't quite "get."

The child struggling to master a new skill.

Imperfect (yes, of course), but ... portals of light, to anyone with eyes to see. Folks who might have something to teach us, if we can be teachable. But above all, beloved of God. Saints or at least potential saints, who maybe only need the opportunity to know they are beloved, claimed, special. Who knows how such saints might blossom into some more intentional, purposeful, holy

and compassionate expression of “saintliness,” if they could see themselves as portals of God’s light? Who knows how *any* of us might flourish and even perhaps really *want* to become better people, with that vision of ourselves?

The mutual love and encouragement we sense between St. Paul and the saints at Philippi suggest that maybe none of us can be a saint all on our own. We need each other to help us see and claim our belovedness and our purpose. Can there be a better vision for a saint’s life than that? To live as portals of Christ’s light... to walk in love that helps others to see themselves as beloved of God, too.

“Grace to you, and peace, from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.

Resources:

Philippians (Interpretation Commentary), Fred Craddock, 1985

Dwelling with Philippians: A Conversation with Scripture through Image and Word, eds. Elizabeth Steele Halstead, Paul Detterman, Joyce Berger, and John D. Witvliet, 2010

a poem: All. Saints.
Praise to the teenager flipping off old liars.
Praise to the teacher kneeling to tie a student's shoe.
Praise to the woman tending a friend's grief.
Praise to the water protector looking a soldier in the eye.
Praise to the eight-year-old hugging an oak.
Praise to the dying one planting crocus bulbs.
Praise to the father bandaging a child's knee.
Praise to the nursing aide bathing an abandoned man.
Praise to the tattoo artist inscribing multiple identities.
Praise to the cashier extending patience to all.
Praise to the lover caressing yearning flesh.
Praise to the street person sharing food with a dog.
Praise to the mourner weeping over lost beauty.
Praise to the rascal inciting amiable mischief.
For all the saints--
imperfect portals of light--
praise.

~ Ruth Moerdyk, November 1, 2021