

“WHAT MAKES A SAINT A SAINT”**Pastor Becky Stephens****Text: Luke 6:20-31 CEB**

One day a man was walking through a beautiful church building with his 4-year-old son. As they walked, the young boy looked around. He stopped and was curious about the stained glass windows that looked so beautiful with their bright colors. As he looked at the windows, he asked, “Who are all the people in the windows, daddy?” “They are Saints,” said the father. “What are Saints, daddy?” the kid asked. The father was stuck. How was he going to explain who saints were to a four year old boy? As the boy was still looking up at the windows and the father was still wondering how he would explain who saints are, the young boy suddenly shouted out, “I know who saints are, daddy. They are the people that the light shines through.”

Quite often we think of saints in the same way we may think of angels or, at the very least, only the very, very well-known people from the past, such as Saint Francis or Mother Teresa. But in the Bible, a saint is simply a follower of Jesus Christ. They become saints by being born again by the Holy Spirit, which can only happen through God.

The people described as saints in the Bible were still very much human. They were called, they were holy, and they were extremely dedicated (both in terms of attitude, and in the sense of being set apart), but they were still real people, far from perfect.

They were fishermen, farmers, tent makers, doctors, teachers, carpenters, former prostitutes, extortionists, outcasts, robbers—you name it! They weren’t infallible, and sometimes they disagreed with one another. They weren’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination.

They were on a journey...the journey of following Jesus...the journey of learning to be more and more like Jesus...which means, becoming more and more loving, less and less judgmental, more and more accepting of others, and less and less condemning of others.

Think about how radically we, as Christ's followers are called to live. In our Gospel Lesson this morning from Luke, Jesus says:

"Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them. ³¹ Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you.

If we were to read on, we would find that we are also called to "lend expecting nothing in return..." We are called to "be kind to ungrateful and wicked people..." We are called to "be compassionate just as [God] is compassionate..." We are not to "judge," nor are we to "condemn" others. Raise your hand if you live like that all the time! And still...God calls us saints!

All the words in both Greek and Hebrew that are used in the Bible and are translated into the word "saint" all have the same definition. According to the Bible, a saint is someone who is sacred, holy, pure, blameless, and dedicated. Now of course, the word "holy" doesn't mean "perfect," it means "set apart" — "set apart to serve God."

And the only way people can be "pure and blameless" is through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross covering and washing away the stain of their sins.

But "dedicated." Now that's interesting. Yes, a saint is dedicated. A saint may fall down, but a saint gets back up again. A saint may fall into sin, lose their temper, hurt another by word or deed, but a saint asks God for forgiveness, accepts that forgiveness and asks God for the strength to grow in love. That's what it means to be "dedicated."

A dedicated follower of Jesus Christ may not always love their enemies, but that is their goal. When they find that they cannot love their enemies, they ask God for God's love to overcome their anger and hatred. When they find it difficult to pray for those who mistreat them, a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ prays for those who mistreat them anyway.

If a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ finds it nearly impossible not to judge another person, they admit this failure to God and ask God to enable them not to judge. They pray to God to help them to love all persons, no matter who that

person is, what they look like or how they live their lives. And because dedicated followers of Jesus Christ are called to “turn the other cheek,” and if someone takes their coat—they are to give their shirt as well...They are to pray to God that they don’t demand “special rights and privileges” from the world and from other people. They are not to take others to court, blast other people in the media or from the pulpit, or from the ballot box!

There can be no doubt that this kind of living, this kind of lifestyle we are called to is as radical as it can possibly get, and no one gets it completely right. If we even begin to think we are getting it right, we are already getting it wrong!

For “all who exalt themselves will be humbled.”

“The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

“Pride comes before a fall.”

Wow. It sounds impossible. And it is.

In verse 20, we are told that Jesus raised his eyes to his [dedicated] disciples and said:

“Happy are you who are poor, because God’s kingdom is yours. Happy are you who hunger now...Happy are you who weep now...But how terrible for you who are rich, because you already received your comfort. How terrible for you who have plenty now, because you will be hungry.” What are we to make of all this stuff?

Jesus turns things upside down and inside out again and again. Could it be that part of what it comes down to is that a secure financial future, and a full stomach are not necessarily bad things in themselves, but they can be deceptive. They are temporary. And rather than being evidence of God’s favor, prosperity can actually get in the way of our relationship with God and with other people. It can steal our love.

To be truly “happy” or “blessed” is to have a relationship with God that is not in jeopardy. Self-sufficiency traps us and separates us from God. Those who lay up treasures for themselves are not—and cannot be—rich toward God. We are blessed or happy when we rely solely on the mercy and love of God, from whom all good things come. Yes, true happiness comes when we rely exclusively on God. And when we rely exclusively on God, we find that we are more loving, more

compassionate, and less judgmental only because we are more dedicated to following Christ. And when we love Christ more—we love others the best.

It's been said that "A saint is someone whose life makes it easier to believe in God." I think most of us have known such people. If we had not, I doubt we would be here this morning. Most of us were given our first glimpse of Jesus through one of His saints.

Maybe it was our mother or father. Maybe it was a neighbor, school teacher or friend. Maybe it was a pastor or a member of the church fellowship we were raised in or a Sunday School teacher. Whoever it was, there was something about them...something that separated them from the rest of the crowd...something special about them that intrigued us and caused us to want to have that something special as well. They were the people who would go the extra mile for us or anyone...they were the people that we knew we could count on no matter what...they were the people who made us feel loved...who gave us just a glimpse of the Divine.

These people are saints...saints of God. They are the people through whom God's light shines through.

Who are the saints that have touched your life with the incredible love of Christ?

Maybe they are still alive. Maybe they are members of this very congregation. Maybe they have passed on, and we lit a candle or placed a flower in memory of them this morning.

We are to let Christ's light shine, like the light shining through the figures in the stained glass windows that the four year old boy saw. We are all 'called to be saints'—people dedicated to God—so that the light of Christ may shine through our words, and our actions.

Thanks be to God!

Amen!