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Sermon

You're a Saint!

Revelation 7:9-11; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

2nd November 2014

I have borrowed heavily and gratefully from a published sermon by Richard Schwedes of Portland Heywood Lutheran Church – Ian Hardcastle

See <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/saints-are-richard-schwedes-sermon-on-discipleship-128637.asp>

Yesterday was All Saints Day. What is that about? The book "For All the Saints," is an official publication by our General Synod. The article on All Saints Day says,

In the New Testament "the saints" means all the believers who are dedicated to God. As such, the word has connections with the dedicated believers of the old covenant. In the Christian tradition particular honour began to be paid to exceptional examples of the Christian way, especially those who died for the faith, the martyrs. So the word "saint" came to describe those who have become officially recognised by the church as in some measure fulfilling their call to be saints. In the seventeenth century Jeremy Taylor [an Anglican Divine] wrote:

The memories of the saints are precious to God, and therefore they ought also to be so to us: and such persons, who serve God by holy living, industrious preaching, and religious dying, ought to have their names preserved in honour, and God be glorified in them, and their holy doctrines and lives published and imitated.

The article continues:

The feast allows us to express our sense of communion with all those who have gone before us, whether known or unknown, who have witnessed to their faith in Christ.

If you were to ask someone what they thought a saint is, how would they respond? Many would probably say someone who has done extraordinary things; a very special person; someone who has done nothing or very little wrong.

However, the Bible has a different understanding. From the book of Acts through to Revelations we see followers of Jesus being referred to as saints. And these weren't special followers of Jesus - they were everyday Christians. Christians like you - so in God's eyes you are a saint.

But you say hold on a moment the person sitting next to me can't be called a saint. You should know about their sins. In fact, how can I be called a saint, I sin?

Well every person here sins. In fact every Christian has sinned and in God's eyes all sins are equal. So if you have ever cheated on your tax return, talked about someone in a bad way, swore at someone, then God

sees you as no better than the person who has committed adultery or committed murder. Now that's hard to take isn't it? But that is the fact, because all sins separate us from God.

And being perfect isn't a criterion to be classed as a saint. You see many of the people referred to as saints in the Bible had problems, they sinned. And not just in small ways.

Instead let's get God's perspective on what a saint is. From Romans 1:7, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints." Or from the Epistle to the Ephesians:

1:1 "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus."

2:19 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people (saints) and members of God's household..."

6:18 "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

Being a saint has nothing to do with what you do. That is, being a saint does not start with what you do - it starts with God saying I love you. And God saying I call you to live your life for me.

When did you first experience this? And how do you experience it now? When you read your Bible; when you worship; when you share God's word with others; when someone comes and helps you; when you love others, without grumbling and without conditions; being a saint requires that we rely on God and are exposed to His love.

So what do we do about sin? The term in the New Testament translated "saints" is simply the adjective "holy." To be holy is to be sanctified or set apart for God. How is this achieved?

Jesus referred to "those who are sanctified by faith in me."¹ Paul wrote of Gentiles becoming "an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."² He wrote to the Corinthians, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."³ The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to "the blood of the covenant that sanctified him..."⁴

Do you notice that all the work or doing is on Jesus' part? We are made holy by faith in Jesus and his work of salvation. He shed his blood for our salvation; we are given his Spirit when we are born again. Through this salvation we are sanctified or made holy.

All Christians are sinners who have trusted in that saving work of Jesus. When we do that we are forgiven of our sin and declared by God to be holy. We were sinners because of our actions - we are saints because of what God is doing. Saints in other words recognise that they rely on Jesus' death on the cross for their eternal future.

So let's explore a couple of passages that highlight what it means to be saints.

Revelation 7:9-11

In John's revelation, he sees saints worshipping God. They come with others from all walks of life, all situations, all nations. They acknowledge that their salvation can come only from God.

Bishop Tom Wright has done the Church a service in helping to clarify what we do know of things beyond the grave. He makes clear that heaven is not our final destination. Rather it is the renewed earth with us in our resurrection bodies.

Before the resurrection, as this passage in Revelation appears to be, the spirits of saints are in what Jesus calls "paradise." You remember he said to the condemned criminal dying beside him, "Today you will be with me in paradise."⁵ The word comes from a Persian word describing a carefully planted garden usually

¹ Acts 26:18

² Rom 15:16

³ 1 Cor 6:11

⁴ Heb 10:29

⁵ Luke 23:43

walled and irrigated with shady trees and beautiful plants for the pleasure of a wealthy family. A pleasant place, which presupposes the result of the judgement to come. In this afterlife state they are free from hunger, thirst and weeping. We have loosely but erroneously called it heaven. Jesus called it "Paradise" and "Abraham's bosom." It is distinct from another place which is not so pleasant where others wait whose judgement would seem to be going to turn out rather differently.

1 John 3:1-3

Saints are God's children. Do you treat your children differently than other children? We all do – that relationship gives them privileges no one else gets. And that is how God treats his saints, as someone who is His child – as someone who has the right of intimacy and access.

John continues by stating that we don't really understand the resurrection life we will inherit. The apostles saw a little of it in the risen Christ, but not enough to know what it really is. However, we know that we will be like Jesus when we are resurrected. Paul attempts to explain this resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15. He resorts to the comparison of a seed to the grown plant or the difference between the earth and stars. What we shall be is far more wonderful than these bodies, yet there is a continuation between these bodies and resurrection bodies – in the same way a plant is a continuation of its seed.

So, we saints are encouraged to place our confidence not in the things or people of this world, but in Jesus, who guarantees us this hope.

And finally let's hear again Matthew 5:1-12. Let's hear what Jesus says saints are like:

As I read this I would encourage you to think who has been like this in your life?

And when have you been like this and when have you not?

Each of us have benefited from saints. Because saints are people who point us to Jesus and what he has done for us.

A minister was talking to a small boy about a stained glass window. The boy asked who the person in the window was. The minister said it was a saint.

The boy replied, "so a saint is someone that the light shines through."

Who has shared God's love with you? They are a saint. With whom do you need to share God's love?

May God's light continue to shine through the saints you know onto you, and may it shine through you onto others.