

I think it was radio commentator Paul Harvey who told about a dog that was shipped by a commercial airline. When the baggage handlers went to unload the dog, they discovered that it was dead. The supervisor was called in, and told the baggage handlers that the potential for a lawsuit was huge, so they had to find a live dog that looked just like the one that died. They told the dog's owner that her dog had been mistakenly shipped to another airport, but her dog would be delivered to her home just as soon as they could track it down.

Meanwhile, they went to local animal shelters and searched a long time until they found a dog that looked just like the one that died. One of the airline employees then personally delivered this happy, squirming dog to the woman who immediately cried out,

“Oh no, that’s not my dog! What have you done with my dog?”

He tried to assure her that it was indeed her dog, but she insisted it was not. When asked how she could be so certain that it was not her dog, she replied, “Because my dog is dead. I was bringing him home for burial in my garden!”

My question for you this morning is this: Do you have to be dead to be a saint? Today is All Saints Sunday, the day when we lift up those who have gone before us who are remembered as examples of Christian faith. For the most part, when we think of saints we think of people long dead who were pious, holy and perfect and spent their lives in prayer and fasting and worship of God.

Today I want to propose that we expand our understanding of sainthood. I believe that saints are ordinary people who do ordinary things, but do so with faith, love, kindness and grace.

That is actually in keeping with the Biblical definition of a saint. In the New Testament the term saint referred to all of those who were set apart as followers of Jesus Christ, all those who had rejected sin and chosen to live Godly lives. That is how the apostle Paul used the term. Paul did not use the term saint to refer only to pious, perfect people, but **all** of God’s people.

In Paul’s letters to various churches he would address the saints in Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and of all places, Corinth! Corinth was about the most pagan, corrupt, sinful city in the ancient world, but Paul called the Corinthians saints!

In the 2nd century, the term saint came to mean something else. It was applied only to those who had died and lived exemplary, devoted lives of service and sacrifice that the church deemed worthy of canonization.

Sainthood soon came to be equated with Christian perfection. With the Protestant Reformation, the term “saint” took on the original meaning. It came to refer not to just a select few, but returned to the Biblical meaning of all the people of God. All Saints Day became a time to remember and celebrate all who had chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

So although we do not usually think of it this way, a saint is not just a person long dead who has led a perfect life.

No, a saint could be your next door neighbor, the person seated next to you today, your spouse, your kids, even yourself.

When we think of saints we think Peter and Paul, Mary and Sarah, that’s obvious. Mother Teresa, Marthin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, that’s likely.

Our loved ones, Irene Lindholm, Joyce Ward, that’s hope.

You and Me? Us? That’s grace.

And it is only by God’s grace that we are able to lead holy lives.

By God’s grace we are able to overcome our inclinations to selfishness and pride.

The key to holy living is found in the little things we do each day, how we live out our commitments, our relationships, how we behave when nobody is watching, the thoughts we have about ourselves and others.

I would define a saint as:

1. A sinner who never gives up
2. A person who makes goodness attractive,
3. A person with a contagious commitment to God.

The good news is that this sort of life is possible, and virtually anyone can be considered saintly if they try their best to live lives that are pleasing to God.

The bad news is that this is not easy. Goodness is demanding. It will always be easier for human beings to be petty, selfish, critical, judgmental. Who was it who said, “If you do not have one nice thing to say about anybody, then come sit down right here by me.”

It can be quite satisfying to be selfish, shallow and critical. Besides, who really has the time to live carefully, to reflect on every word, every action? Who has time to be honest, trustworthy, loyal and good? If not for our jobs, families, neighbors, co-workers and friends, we could all be saints, but life is too busy, messy and complicated.

That is where God’s grace comes in—we cannot do it on our own.

One of the essential doctrines of Methodism is the doctrine of sanctification. John Wesley believed that it was possible to become perfect in love in this life. That if you really tried and wanted it with all your heart, you could become perfect in love with God's help.

The Bible is essentially a record of the way that God took the lives of ordinary people to do extraordinary things, hence they are remembered as saints.

Ordinary people like:

- Moses, one who killed an Egyptian, spent 40 years in seclusion, stuttered and would do anything to deny the call of God.
- Jonah, asked by God to be a Prophet and runs in the opposite direction
- Sarah who was too old to have children, but God made her the mother of an entire nation.
- Deborah, who went into battle herself became a Judge and a Prophet and was called the mother of Israel.
- And then there's Zacchaeus. Our Scripture lesson today tells us about him by saying:

“Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, named Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way.

He was a short man and could not see over the crowd.

So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said,

“Zacchaeus, hurry down from there! Today I will be a guest in your home.”

Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him.

Everyone who witnessed this was indignant. “What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?”

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically,

“Master, I give away half my income to the poor, and if I am caught cheating I pay four times the damages.”

Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to your house, Zacchaeus. For I have come to save and restore the lost.”

Chief tax collector Zacchaeus, of all people, would become a disciple of Jesus. It was strange the way it happened. He tried so hard to be discreet, but then Jesus looks up and spots him, and says, “Zaccheus, come on down. I'm coming over to your house today to eat.” Zaccheus learned that there is no hiding from God.

But he knows this is a scandal, and people are in an uproar that Jesus would eat at the home of such a person. In his own defense, Zaccheus tells Jesus how generous he is. That spirit of generosity is enough, and Jesus blesses him. That spirit of faithful generosity is so impressive that Jesus forever changes his life.

Ordinary Zacchaeus becomes sanctified and transformed.

He is a good model for us as we begin the month of November, which is traditionally Stewardship time in our church.

There are so lives that could be touched and changed through our ministry. If you value the things we do in this church, then we need your generous support. As you consider your pledge for the coming year, think about Zacchaeus.

When Jesus learned of his generosity, salvation came to his house. Generosity will not only help you become a saint and keep you out of purgatory too!

There are numerous examples of saints all around us, examples I see every day. People who give and serve with such goodness, commitment and humility that it is just a joy to behold.

People who hold their tongues when it would be easy to say something mean.

People who help a neighbor, provide a meal, say a prayer, share their soul. They are everywhere-- those who bear the burdens of others as if they were their own, those who make goodness attractive.

Hundreds of years ago in a small town in Europe there was a young man who was wild and mischievous. He began stealing sheep from local farmers, and made quite a career out of sheep stealing. He did it for years without getting caught. But finally he did get caught. The local farmers decided his fate. They would brand the letters "ST" for sheep thief on his forehead. He would carry that shame forevermore.

Thus publicly branded, he was filled with remorse. He decided to turn over a new leaf and try to live a Godly life. He became a devout Christian, a model for others. Whenever someone in the village needed help, he was there. Whenever someone needed food, money, or clothing, he was there.

He helped everyone, completely living his life for others.

Many years later, a stranger came to the village. Sitting in a cafe, the stranger noticed an old man with a strange brand on his forehead. He also noticed that every villager loved him, stopping to share a kind word, to pay respects, to give and receive a hug. He appeared to be the most beloved man in that village.

Curious, he asked someone, “What does that brand on that old man’s forehead stand for?”

“He won’t say, it happened so long ago,” the woman replied, “but we all assume it stands for Saint.”

Well, if a sheep thief can become a saint then I believe that there is hope for us all.

Thanks Be To God.

Amen.

Today is a special day for us to remember our honored dead.

In our church family we have had 23 deaths in the past year.

These people were mothers and fathers, spouses and siblings, neighbors, friends.

Their lives were immeasurably important to the people who loved them.

None of us can fully comprehend what has been lost with their passing.

I know that many of you have lost loved ones this year, as well.

The heart of our faith contains a promise that death is not the end of life,

but the beginning of life everlasting.

The names of the church members who have died within the past year are going to appear on the screens. As we see these names, please offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their lives and legacies...