

I'm No Saint ... or Am I?

a sermon
by Dan Griswold
Trinity Reformed Church
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Revelation 7:9–17

Psalm 34:1–10, 22

I hear it now and then, from people as they speak about themselves: “I’m no saint!” they say.

(Maybe I’ve heard it from *you*. Yeah, you know who you are!)

Those who say this usually are acknowledging that they’re not perfect.

They say this to tell others,
“Don’t expect too much from me.”

They say this be kind to themselves,
They say this to forgive themselves.

They say this so they might feel a bit better about themselves,
what they have done,
what they have failed to do.

Because what comes to mind for most people when they think of a saint is someone

who is highly moral,
whose ethical mistakes are few,
whose good deeds are many,
who avoids without fail the vices into which so many fall.

Of course, a good many people take it a step further. Saints, they think, live lives of such exceptional purity that they haven’t really lived. What’s a life without a few vices, especially the fun ones? What’s living without living it up? “I’m no saint,” then, is a boast, a claim to being authentic for having taken a walk on the wild side.

And then there are the cynical, who think that there *are* no saints, and those who are thought to be saints just haven’t yet been unmasked as the sinners they really are. For the cynics, all virtue is just concealed vice, and those who look so moral must have some terrible secret they’ve somehow still kept hidden.



In the Christian faith, “saint” is typically a word reserved for only some but not all believers. Even though there is a long list of those who have been named by others as saints, it’s still a list that can be counted, it has a beginning and an end (even if in between beginning and end it occasionally gets filled in a little more).

And you might notice that no one on that list is currently walking around. Yup. Among the requirements for being on that list ... is that you have to be dead. Few of us want to rush

that! This alone would lend some truth to the claim, “I’m no saint.” Well, duh. You’re not dead.

To be more serious, there’s something about the saints that has their truest home in heaven, released from suffering, engaged together in unending worship of God:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”

I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”

Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.”



There’s something about saints I want you to know. In the Bible, “saints” is always in the plural; *never* do you find the word “saint,” in the singular. In the Bible, no one is called “a saint,” and nowhere in the Bible do you find someone with the title of “Saint.” Later we might call some of them “Saint Peter” or “Saint Paul” or “Saint John.” And sure, in some editions of the Bible, the books might have titles with the word “Saint,” like “The Gospel According To Saint Luke.” But the actual text of scripture doesn’t ever use “Saint” as a descriptor for a person.

But the Bible does talk about “saints.” And what the Bible means when it speaks of saints is people whom God has made holy. That’s who saints are, in the Bible. The saints are the people God has made holy, a holiness that is both inside them and outside them; a holiness that is lived, and nurtured, and growing, and shared.



Here’s what I think is important for us to know. Not one of us is a “saint,” not alone. Only *together* are we “saints.” Only together,

as the people of God,
as the body of Christ,
as the church of the Lord,
as the fellowship of Jesus,
as those in mission together —

that’s when we are saints.

Not alone am I a saint; not by your lonesome are you a saint.

Only together are we saints.

Together, by God’s choice, not ours.

Together, by the complete and perfect and atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Together,

as we worship,
as we work,
as we bear each other's burdens,
as we share our God given gifts,
as we love each other,
and bless each other,
and help each other,
and challenge each other,
and forgive each other,
as we live today
in anticipation of God's redeemed tomorrow,
as we follow Jesus.

That is how we are saints. Not alone, not as isolated individuals. Together, by the grace of God, who in Jesus Christ makes us holy.

And yet, there is something right about thinking of those Christians who have passed on, even if they have not been canonized, even if they were not perfect, even if we knew them not only at their best but also at their worst,

it is somehow right to think of them, in a special way, in a way that veers toward the singular or individual, each one of them as a *saint*.

I think of some of those who have passed on this year, and in years past, and I believe there *was* something saintly about them.

The Christian author Frederick Buechner has this to say about saints:

*In his holy flirtation with the world,
God occasionally drops a handkerchief.
These handkerchiefs are called saints.*

We love these handkerchiefs, these saints of ours. We love them, and we miss them. And we are not truly without them. Because God holds us close, and holds them closer, they are, they remain, near to us.

Sure, some (or most) of those we remember today would not be comfortable being called "saints." They would laugh or blush or change the subject. And, in part, they'd be right to do so.

Remember, it's not because of their goodness that they are counted among the saints. It's not their strength or purity, something they did all on their own that lets them be numbered among that great crowd of witnesses. No, it's because of God, who holds us close, and holds them closer.

And remember that their saintliness was not only a gift given to them, but also a gift they shared, with us. They are signs of God's "holy flirtation with the world." And so the gift is ours:

to receive well and with gratitude,
to receive by seeking to do the same,
to receive and then adopt as our own some of their saintly behavior.

The point of saintliness is holiness. The reason why God makes saints is so we might learn from them to be better.

Can we?

Will we?

*O magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together . . .*

*Look to him, and be radiant;
so your faces shall never be ashamed . . .*

*O taste and see that the LORD is good;
happy are those who take refuge in him.*

God has blessed them and us by making us holy, by calling us and naming us, together, as saints.

And so, may we, together, day by day, in the embrace of God, be more saintly, to embrace God's gift, *this* gift, that I and you *are* "saints."