

**TOUGH CHOICES:
DO METHODISTS HAVE SAINTS?
NOVEMBER 3, 2013
ALL SAINTS DAY**

(Greeting at beginning of sermon)

Good morning, saints!

Good morning, sinners.

Friday was All Saints Day in the church calendar.

And so today is All Saints Sunday.

Do we do that in the United Methodist Church?

Do Methodists have saints?

Decision time.

Not really a choice, but your decision.

Do Methodists have saints?

Yes, or no.

Well.....

Most of us think of saints with a bit of a Roman Catholic understanding.

Above all else, to be a saint you've got to be... what? Dead.

And you must have lived a really good life on this earth.

We usually think of saints as those select few, a spiritual elite, from the distant past.

Now they're in heaven with God.

And actually, that's pretty close to the Catholic view.

Granted, the Roman Catholic concept is a little more complicated than that.

The first qualification is living the exemplary life.

Second, you've got to die before you can be considered.

Third, there should be at least two miracles assigned to your intervention.

This is where it may be a bit difficult for non-Catholics to understand.

First, you need to know the Catholic Church teaches there is a purgatory,

a place of refining fire, a punishment that "purges" you of all sin after death.

Once you've done your time in purgatory,

you can finally move on to heaven.

In Catholic thinking a saint is one who lived a pure and holy life,

so they bypass purgatory and go straight to heaven.

Now they are right there with God.

A Christian can then pray to that saint,

asking them to pray to God for us.

A saint is alive in heaven,

right there with God,

and so we can ask them to pray for us.

It's like asking any other Christian to pray for you,

except this one has a superior location.

The idea is, since they are there in heaven's throne room,

they've got some extra pull with God.

If two miracles are attributed to their intercession, their prayers,

and those miracles are investigated and approved by the Catholic Church,

that person can be considered for sainthood.

When they have made it through all the investigations and are approved,

they are “canonized” as a saint.

Keep an eye on the news, because Popes John Paul II and John XXIII
have been under consideration,
and are expected to be canonized as saints later this year.

So there is All Saints Day to celebrate those who have gone before us into heaven.

And the next day is All Soul’s day,
to remember those who have died and are in purgatory,
being purified for heaven.

That’s how most people think of saints:

those select and holy few from the past,
figures to be found in stained glass with halos shining around their heads.

In an article on saints in the *Wall Street Journal* in August, Andy Crouch wrote,

“The only non-Catholic denomination that has something like it is the Eastern Orthodox church,
whose worshippers bestow a kiss on the icons that crowd the sanctuary,
greeting them like members of their family.

For Catholics the saints are "up there,"
well placed to whisper special requests in the divine ear.

For the Eastern Orthodox, the saints are "right here,"
surprisingly intimate presences in the earthly church.

Most Protestants, meanwhile, blanch at the idea of granting human beings this much reverence.
Some, like the ultra-Protestant Plymouth Brethren, aim to eliminate all such distinctions.
Recalling that the Apostle Paul addressed whole congregations as "saints" in his letters,
they take the position that all are "brethren,"
none more sanctified than the next.”

(Saints Be Praised – Officially or Otherwise, The Wall Street Journal, Aug. 15, 2013)

There is a powerful biblical case to be made that every Christian,
all of us, even you and I,

carry the God-given label of “saint.”

The word “saint” is the English translation of the original New Testament Greek word “hagios,”
which literally means “sacred” or “holy.”

Saints are “holy ones.”

The apostle Paul addresses his letters to saints:

“to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.” (Ro.1:7)

“to the church of God in Corinth,
to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.” (1Cor.1:2)

“to the church of God in Corinth,
together with all the saints throughout Achaia.” (2Cor.1:1)

“to the saints in Ephesus.” (Ep.1:1)

“to the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi.” (Phlp.1:1)

“to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae.” (Col.1:2)

Every Christian, every follower of Christ, is considered a saint.

YOU are considered a saint.

I am considered a saint.

The person sitting next to you in the pew....

Don’t look so shocked!

Oh, we’re clearly not saints by virtue of our own goodness.

As Paul wrote to the church in Rome,

“The righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came

by Christ Jesus.”

(Ro.3:22-24)

We are saints, not by virtue of our own goodness.

On our own, we're NOT GOOD!

ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But we can have a righteousness given to us by God.

A righteousness that's not about us,

but about Jesus.

Jesus, who lived the only perfect, pure, flawless human life.

Jesus, who was perfectly obedient to God the Father.

Jesus, who took our sins and the sin of the world onto himself,

and suffered and died on the cross

to pay the penalty for that sin.

If we will accept that as his gift to us, if we will trust him for that,

then we have a righteousness not our own.

We have HIS righteousness.

And, the Bible says, we can be made increasingly more righteous in thought, word, and deed,

by the power of his Spirit who enters into us when we put our trust in him.

You see, that moment of being “born again” is not the end of the story.

It is the beginning.

Once we're born again,

it's time we start growing up,

becoming more like Christ,

growing in righteousness,

becoming holy or saintly.

Jesus repeatedly spoke of his followers as to their potential,

what they could be, what they should be, what we will be.

He said to his followers, early in his ministry,

“You are the salt of the earth

and the light of the world.”

(Mt.5:13-16)

They've just begun following and learning from him,

and already he sees them that way.

And the Bible says one day we will live into the fulfillment of Jesus' vision,

John wrote,

“Beloved, now we are children of God,

and it has not appeared as yet what we will be.

We know that when He appears,

we will be like him,

because we will see him as he is.”

(1Jn.3:2)

As we get to know Jesus better, we become more like him.

And one day that process will be completed.

But regardless of where we are in that growth process,

we are, from the first moment we trust in Christ, counted as saints.

The category of saint is not just for Augustine, Thomas Aquinas,

Pope John XIII, Pope John Paul II or Mother Teresa.

It is for all who trust in Christ,

because we “have a righteousness from God

through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Andy Crouch went on in his Wall Street Journal article to say,

“And yet even the most ardent Protestants seem to end up with informal saints,

figures who play an outsize role in memory and aspiration.

Often they are founders of significant movements.

John and Charles Wesley's names are never far from the minds of serious Methodists.”

There are those pivotal figures in church history who warrant special attention.

People who had an outsized impact.

People whose lives are worth upholding as examples.

The martyrs of the early church

who willingly laid down their lives rather than renounce faith in Christ.

Or a more recent martyr, like Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

who refused to cooperate with the Third Reich,

but actively resisted the Nazis,

until he was arrested, imprisoned, and hung by the neck.

There are modern day martyrs paying the ultimate price

in Muslim countries and North Korea.

We might think of Billy Graham, so devoted to leading people to faith in Christ,

without a hint of scandal.

Or Mother Teresa, serving the poor and dying in India.

There are those people who are important in our own personal faith stories.

We might run that story back to Jesus, Paul, Peter and the others.

That story would come through John and Charles Wesley,

Anglican priests who sought to breathe new life into their church

and ended up founding the Methodist movement.

And then, the story includes people whose faith brought more direct, immediate blessings to us.

For all of us here today, the story includes people you may not know.

Like Pastor Larry Altman, who planted this congregation starting back in 1980.

And the first members who came alongside him in that pioneering effort.

Northwest Hills was chartered in November of 1984, 29 years ago,

so today is a good day to give thanks for those people,

for their faith and for their efforts.

My personal story includes faithful parents who raised me with bedtime Bible stories and prayers.

They raised me in the church,

not just making me sit through Sunday worship,

but also delivering me to Sunday school and, later,

the youth group, and youth choir,

where I learned the biblical stories of God's goodness,

and I was challenged to apply those truths to my life.

My parents saw to it that seeds were sown

that would one day blossom into faith.

Perhaps you were blessed in that way.

If so, today give thanks for what your parents did for you.

Your story might include a friend who shared Christ with you or invited you to church.

I remember a guy at Texas A&M who played a pivotal role for me.

In my freshman year, as so many freshmen do,

I tossed out all my parents' values,

and was caught up in the party life,

having some laughs, but not really finding joy.

I was feeling pretty empty.

My neighbor in the dormitory invited me to go with a party with him.

What could I say?

It was a party!
 So we set out that night to walk across the campus to the party.
 We came upon a campus ministry group.
 "Here we are," he said.
 I thought, "Well, I know church, so I can do this."
 We sat down with them and joined in
 praying and singing all the songs I'd learned
 at church and youth choir:
 They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love,
 Blowing in the Wind, Amazing Grace.
 And as we sang Amazing Grace, the words pierced my soul.
 "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
 that saved a wretch like me."
 I don't remember my neighbor's name,
 but I remember him as one of God's saints.
 There might be an author whose book moved you closer to Christ.
 Or a Bible teacher who pointed you toward biblical truths that made a real-life difference.
 When I was in elementary school I had a Sunday school teacher who made a difference.
 I could not tell you one lesson she taught in Sunday school.
 But when my mom took me to the grocery store,
 and we bumped into my teacher, she talked to ME.
 Not just to my mom,
 but to ME.
 She let me know that I mattered to her.
 And that helped me realize that I mattered to Jesus.
 Who are the saints in your life?
 Who are the ones whose influence nudged you toward Jesus?
 In his Wall Street Journal column Andy Crouch made a very important point,
 "Saints suggest to us that there is more to life, and to faith, than most of us dare to know.
 A century-old aphorism attributed to the French essayist Charles Péguy says it well:
 "Life holds only one tragedy, ultimately:
 not to have become a saint."
 I'd like to close by offering you a seriously tough choice:
 Will you become a saint to someone else?
 Will you go to the effort to bring someone closer to Christ?
 Will you do all you can to point your children toward him?
 Will you live out your faith so others can see it,
 know there's something different and attractive there,
 and they'll want that something different for themselves?
 Will you pray for others with the Spirit of Christ?
 Will you serve others with the love of Christ?
 Will you be such an influence in the lives of others that one day
 someone or even several someones will remember you as
 having been used by God to draw them closer to Him?
 Who will one day consider you to be a saint in their life?
 Who are you blessing in the name of Christ?

Today, as we come to the table of Christ and share in the meal to which he invites us,
 we celebrate our union with Christ

and our union with our brothers and sisters in Christ, in all times and all places.
It is, quite literally, the communion of saints mentioned in the Apostles' Creed.
So today let's remember the saints who have gone before us.
And consider how you might be used by Christ to bless others,
and so be considered one of the saints in their lives.

Scriptures cited: Ro.1:7; 1Cor.1:2; 2Cor.1:1; Ep.1:1; Phlp.1:1; Col.1:2; Ro.3:22-24