

## CALLED TO BE SAINTS

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

At the first of June 1968, my family relocated to Atlanta, Georgia from Nashville, Tennessee. We moved into a rental house in the Buckhead neighborhood, just a couple of blocks from the very large Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church. This cradle Presbyterian was invited to attend the Baptist Vacation Bible School at 2<sup>nd</sup> Ponce. The church had a very active and very large recreation ministry, directed by Rev. Bobby Ward. That summer I hit my growth spurt and shot up to 5' 10". I wanted to play baseball for Coach Ward. He told me I could play baseball for him if I would play basketball for him on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade team in the winter. I agreed. I liked basketball a lot but didn't know anything about playing basketball. I think Coach Ward just saw a 5' 10" 7<sup>th</sup> grader and grabbed me.

Imagine this – Coach Ward signed us up to play in three different youth basketball leagues – two church leagues and one city league. That season we played – get this – 40 games! Some nights we would finish a game, get on a bus, and go to another gym and play another game. We finished the season 36-4, won two championships and came in second in the third league. By then, my hopes of continuing to grow and play basketball in high school and college were stoked. But I never passed 6 feet, only played two minutes on the floor in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and finished out my basketball career in high school church league and college intramural basketball.

Our church league team was called "The Saints." Two of our biggest rivals were the Catholic Cathedral of Christ the King and the Catholic Cathedral of the Holy Spirit. When I think back, I chuckle when I remember how Coach Ward used to encourage us to beat Christ the King and the Holy Spirit, and when we would brag when the Saints actually ***did*** beat Christ the King and the Holy Spirit. I doubt as twelve-year-olds we were much aware of the theological heresy we were spouting, but even then we thought it was funny to say!

We Presbyterians – or the Baptists, for that matter – aren't too big on celebrating the saints, at least not in terms of revering or praying to different saints. We don't have any hesitation about referring to St. Paul, St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, St. John, St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, and so forth. But we don't pray to particular saints for help for different causes, we don't light candles to different saints, we don't officially canonize people in the Reformed tradition. But, if you visit any congregation that has a history room or talk to folks in most any congregation, you'll hear people talk about the "saints" that have gone before them in the church. You may even hear them talk about the "saints" among them. Of course, you never hear the people who are the "saints" among us refer to themselves that way.

But in our Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, we do talk a lot about the “communion of saints.” That phrase is in the Apostles’ Creed, right after “the holy catholic church” (since I mentioned two Catholic cathedrals earlier, it might be worth reminding everyone that “catholic” in the creed is spelled with a lowercase “c” and means “universal,” not “Roman Catholic.”). In many ways, the “communion of saints” is another way to talk about “the covenant community of faith” that is the church. Here’s how our Presbyterian/Reformed understanding of “the saints” is well expressed:

“In early Christian tradition, saints’ days began as a way to mark the anniversary of a martyr’s death — his or her ‘birthday’ as a saint. By the middle of the church’s first millennium, there were so many martyrs (particularly due to the persecution of Diocletian) that it was hard to give them all their due. All Saints’ Day was established as an opportunity to honor all the saints, known and unknown.

“All Saints’ Day has a rather different focus in the Reformed tradition. While we may give thanks for the lives of particular luminaries of ages past, the emphasis is on the ongoing sanctification of the *whole* people of God. Rather than putting saints on pedestals as holy people set apart in glory, we give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of the believers in this and every age. This is an appropriate time to give thanks to members of the community of faith who have died in the past year. We also pray that we may be counted among the company of the faithful in God’s eternal realm.”<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul — whom we also know as St. Paul — begins his letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Ephesians, and the Colossians with some variation of a greeting to “the saints.” It stretches the imagination that Paul thought that all of the people who would read and hear his letters were actually saints — that is, in the sense of someone who is always exceptionally good, always morally perfect, always unwavering in faith, etc. Of course, that’s really an unrealistic caricature of a saint (just read some of their biographies, autobiographies, or personal writings).

We know Paul didn’t think of the people as saints in that way because, at least in the case of his Corinthian letters, he was writing to a church full of troublesome and quarrelsome people who were divided because of their theology, their moral behavior, and their ranking of believers in the church hierarchy. And, yet, Paul insists on calling them “saints,” such as in his greeting to the contentious church at Corinth, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1 Corinthians 1:2)

No, Paul wrote to the “saints” in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Colossae because he knew they had been “called out, set aside, set apart” in Jesus Christ, by God and for God’s work. And Paul makes clear that their status as “saints” is not their own doing — it is all God’s doing! In the nine verses of his letter’s greeting, Paul names God seven times and our Lord Jesus Christ eleven times! This is the same thing Paul writes to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

If Paul were around today to write us a letter, I imagine he would greet us as “the church of God that is in Wallace, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1 Corinthians 1:2) Do you think Paul would expect to find a bunch of perfect people at 205 W. Main Street in Wallace? Probably not – but then, he **would** expect and **hope to find** a group of “saints” who have been called out by God, sanctified by God, set apart by God, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Here’s how one writer has tied Paul’s greeting to the saints in Corinth to us 21<sup>st</sup> century believers in Wallace and everywhere else the church gathers: “The church in our day (or in our town), like that in Corinth, has been called by God. We, like the Corinthians, have been extravagantly equipped for faithful living. We, like the Corinthians, live in the midst of a culture that makes faithfulness a moral and intellectual challenge. We, like the Corinthians, are (or ought to be) committed to the truth and life-shaping power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which puts our lives in the world into a context that helps faithful living make sense. And we, like the Corinthians (sigh!), routinely fall short of the expectations of the Gospel and need to be called to greater and more difficult (and perhaps more creative) faithful living. Today’s passage is a hopeful one that emphasizes God’s call and provision, and assumes that it is, indeed, possible to live a sanctified life in the middle of an unsanctified culture.”<sup>2</sup>

So, what does all of this mean for you and me as the Wallace Presbyterian Church? Last week, we were reminded of how our baptisms define us as “children of God.” That’s **who** we are . . . that’s **whose** we are. This week Paul reminds us that as the saints of God:

- we have been given the grace of God in Christ Jesus
- we have been enriched by him in every way, in speech and knowledge of every kind
- the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among us
- we are not lacking in any spiritual gift
- God will strengthen us to the end
- God is faithful
- and God has called us into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

You are an extraordinarily gifted congregation. We have a rich history of a great communion of saints that stretches all the way back to November 1884 when this church was established. As it says on our church website, “Many faithful members have gone before us on the corner of W. Main and S. Raleigh Streets. They have left us a wonderful legacy of faith and a beautiful church building, both of which are given to us in trust as members of our congregation who carry on what those saints began and who seek to go where God would lead us.” Sometimes when I ask people to tell about influential mentors in their faith lives, they speak of the people in terms of being “saints” – not because they were perfect people, but because they strived to live a life worthy of God’s calling to which they had been called. And then I ask, “Thirty, forty, fifty years from now, when people in the Wallace Presbyterian

Church are asked to tell about influential mentors in their lives – the ‘saints’ who have gone before them, if you will – what will they say about us? Not for our glory, but to the glory of God and God’s purposes.” As one commentator said about Paul’s greeting and encouragement to the Corinthians, “being set apart for God and toward each other has been and remains difficult for the Corinthians. But God has given them the means to those ends. And Paul expects them to use that means.” I reckon if Paul wrote a letter to us today, he would tell us the same thing – God has given us what we need to be God’s people and we are expected to use what God gives us to be “the saints” who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the 1920’s, a British woman named Lesbia Lesley Scott often wrote hymns to teach her children about the faith and God’s creation. She never intended for any of them to be published. However, one of her songs has endured and become quite popular (even though it was not one of her favorites nor of her children). The song is in our hymnbook, #730, “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God.” Over the years, some critics have claimed the song is too simplistic or even childlike. However, people like to sing the song, because it relates “the saints” to our everyday lives.

With apologies to Lesbia Lesley Scott – and with some rather forced rhymes – I rewrote the final verse for us to think about as we continue to discern **who** we are and **whose** we are as “the church that is in Wallace, those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

*They lived not only in ages past;  
there are hundreds of thousands still;  
the world is bright with the joyous saints  
who love to do Jesus’ will.*

*You can meet them in school, or in Mojo’s, or at Burney’s,  
in church, at work, in Main Street shops,  
or at Rotary;  
for the saints of God are just folk like me,  
and I mean to be one too.*

***Let us pray: By your will, O God, we go out into the world with good news of your undying love, and minister in the midst of human need to show wonders of your grace. When we call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, do not let us be discouraged, but make us brave and glad and hopeful in your Word and in our work and ministry as your people; through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “All Saints’ Day,” at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>2</sup> Dwight Peterson, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9,” January 20, 2008 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).