

## SAINT YOU

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 5, 2017  
based on Colossians 1:1-5; Philippians 1:1-5, Ephesians 1:1-8**

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times. We are celebrating this fall the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and in this series we are using key ideas of the Reformation to help us reflect about our own faith. We have noted that those key Reformation ideas can all be summarized in short Latin phrases; the phrase for this morning is one of Martin Luther's favorites—*simul iustus et peccator*, which means, simultaneously justified (or righteous) and a sinner; or another way to put it would be that Christians are simultaneously sinner and saint. This is one of the most important Reformation concepts, which we will be pursuing this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Are you a saint? According to the New Testament, if you have faith in Jesus, you are. This is clear in Paul's letters, where he routinely begins by addressing his letters "to the saints." His letter to the Ephesians begins, "To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 1:1) To the Colossians he writes, "To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae" (Col. 1:2); and to the Philippian church he writes, "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi." (Phil. 1:1) The word translated as "saints" is the Greek word *hagiois*, which literally means "holy ones." We would tend to think of the holy ones as people who are especially good and pious. But when Paul uses this term, he clearly means it to refer to everyone in the church. He does not start his letters, "To the saints, and the rest of you bums . . ." He treats the whole congregation as being the saints. This reflects an idea about sainthood that is quite different from how people commonly think of it.

Today, we are heirs to an idea of sainthood which has come to us out of a long tradition in the church stretching back through the Middle Ages. This traditional idea of sainthood is in fact a distorted concept; and with it comes a whole bundle of distortions about the Christian life and the Christian promise. It is helpful to get clear about it all.

Before the Protestant Reformation, the basic teaching of the medieval Catholic church was that the saints are those who dwell with Christ in heaven. This means that you cannot be a saint now, on earth; and it also means that you are not going to be a saint when you die either, because in all likelihood you are not going to heaven. Most of us, according to medieval Catholic teaching, are going to purgatory. Purgatory, as we noted earlier in this series, is a place where the church taught that most Christians will go at death. It is not hell; but it is not heaven either. It was conceived as an intermediate realm where we must work off all the sins that we did on earth, or all the good we failed to do,

until finally—after years or even centuries in purgatory—we might finally merit a place in heaven, and join the saints.

But there are a few people on this earth who live lives of such exemplary holiness that they may enter directly into heaven at death. Those people are the saints—the “holy ones”—the people who were so pious and morally good that they are surely right now in heaven. Who are those people? The medieval Catholic church claimed that it had the authority to discern and to declare who is a saint, through a process that the church developed, and that is still in use today. Over time there came to be a list of such people, and those people were considered *the saints* (along with those who made it through purgatory, but we are never quite sure who those are). The rest of us are the sinners.

The saints were presented as examples for others; but the medieval Catholic church carried the idea much further, by building on the New Testament concept of the “communion of the saints”—which is the idea that there is a spiritual fellowship that connects Christians on earth with those who now dwell in heaven. Based on that spiritual connection, the medieval Catholic church taught that you can pray to the saints in heaven. You could ask a saint to intercede for you with God to help with a particular need. Why, you may ask, would you pray to a saint? Why not go directly to God? Well, what makes you think that the God of the universe is going to care about your puny need?! To people in the Middle Ages, a saint seemed more accessible; a saint, having lived an ordinary human life, would understand your need, people thought. So it became very popular in the Middle Ages for people to pray to the saints. In churches, there were statues or paintings put up of various saints, and those became focal points for prayer and devotion. Various saints became associated with various needs, a tradition that continues to this day. If you lose something, you pray to St. Anthony. If you need traveling protection, you look to St. Christopher, and perhaps put a little statue of St. Christopher in your car. If you need to sell a house, you pray to St. Joseph, since he was carpenter and is thus the patron saint of housing, and for really good fortune you might bury a St. Joseph statue next to your for sale sign.

In the Middle Ages, this developed into a situation where the saints were seen almost as mini-gods, each represented by images in church buildings, to which people were continually coming with petitions. Notice how this looks an awful lot like paganism—with multiple divinities, each with particular powers, and statues that are the focal point of worship. The Reformers came to realize that this whole business was way off the mark.

In the midst of all sorts of religious claims and practices, and a myriad of popular superstitions, how do we know what is actually true? The Reformers recognized that there is one sure place to look, which we considered at the very opening of this sermon series. Their guiding principle was *sola scriptura*—the Bible alone; we need to look to what God reveals to us in God’s Word. When the Reformers did this, they found in the Scriptures a very different idea of who are the saints and who are the sinners.

We have noted already in this series that we are all sinners, for, as Paul says in Romans, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) No one is good enough to achieve a right relationship with God or to merit the reward of heaven. But if no one can become holy enough for God, who are the “holy ones” or the saints that Paul talks about? The letter of Hebrews says, “By God’s will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.” (Hebrews 10:10) It is Christ, through the gift of himself on the cross, who puts us right with God, cleansing us with God’s forgiveness and thus making us holy in God’s sight. As Paul went on to say, “So they are justified—or set right with God—by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . which is effective through faith. (Romans 3:24-25) What this means is that the saints—those who are in fellowship with God and heirs of eternal life—are not those who achieve sufficient holiness, which would be no one. The saints are those who have faith in Christ and who thus by his grace are reconciled with God and brought thereby into God’s eternal Kingdom. This is why Paul could address all the believers in every church as “the saints.”

So in our church, who are the sinners, and who are the saints? You and I are both. If we have faith in Christ, we are *simul iustus et peccator*-- simultaneously sinners and yet also saints. We are always imperfect—we never stop being sinners—but we are forgiven sinners who are made into the saints by the grace of Jesus Christ.

This is why in our church we don’t call the great leaders of our history saint so-and-so. It is not Saint Luther or Saint Wesley, because if we started putting the title Saint in front of people’s names, we’d have to use the title Saint in front of all of our names. That might be nice, I suppose. “Saint Dave.” But then to be fair, we’d also have to use the title Sinner in front of all of our names. It’s probably best that we don’t use such titles at all. But it is important that we keep in mind both sides of the equation. If we think only that we are saints, we can fall into spiritual pride and complacency, and forget our constant need for the grace of Christ. If on the other hand we think only that we are sinners, we can fall into self-loathing and despair. But the heart of the gospel is precisely the message the Christ makes sinners into saints. We are saints, not because we are perfect, but because we have Christ as Savior.

So you see the huge difference between the Biblical idea of saints, reaffirmed in the Protestant Reformation, and the old traditional idea of saints, which had grown and taken hold in the medieval church. In the traditional view, the saints are in heaven. In the Biblical view, the saints are on earth, and also, after death, by God’s grace, in heaven. In the traditional view, some people are sinners, and others are saints. In the Biblical view, all people are sinners; but those sinners who put their faith in Christ are made the saints. In the traditional view, the sinners on earth can pray to the saints in heaven for help. In the Biblical view, the saints on earth, along with the saints in heaven, pray to God.

And yet today when people hear the word “saint,” it is the traditional view that often comes to mind—so much so that many Protestant churches avoid the word “saint”

altogether, except when referring to some historical figures for whom the title of saint is almost part of the name, such as Saint Patrick. Yet within the Biblical idea of saint is one of the central truths proclaimed by the Reformation—that those who are unrighteous are nevertheless accounted as righteous when, through faith, they receive the saving grace of Christ. So we are all the saints, as we put our trust in Christ. This does not mean that we just blithely continue in unrighteousness, taking forgiveness for granted; for if we truly put our faith in Christ, we will be transformed by His Spirit and inspired to show forth the goodness and the love of God. But what we finally know—and what gives us confidence—is that our destiny, our eternal future, depends not on our imperfect efforts but upon Christ. As Paul declared, “In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, according to the riches of his grace that he has lavished on us.” (Ephesians 1:7-8)