

“Saints Elsewhere?”

Philippians 1:1-11; with reference to Hebrews 11

November 1, 2009 (All Saints' Sunday)

Denbigh Presbyterian Church

Rev. Deborah Dail

Whenever the subject of “saints” comes up I always think about them being elsewhere.

Aren't saints elsewhere – like in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches?

Aren't saints elsewhere – like heaven?

Aren't saints elsewhere – like pretty far from me because I sure don't feel very saintly and I don't know many people who do.

The answers: yes . . . and no.

Writer and priest Father James Martin writes about an interesting “elsewhere” for a saint. In his book, *My Life With the Saints*, he writes of St. Jude as the Saint of the Sock Drawer. Actually, St. Jude is the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes, but Martin's \$3.50 mail order, plastic statue of St. Jude eventually ended up in his sock drawer during his teenage years. He didn't want his friends to know he was interested in a saint or that he ever had “hopeless causes.” Personally, I find myself wanting to learn more about St. Jude! My sock drawer is certainly a lost cause, and I have a few others, too.

Back in the 1500s the protesters (later known as Protestants) who set out to reform the Roman Catholic Church believed all talk of saints should be done “elsewhere.” They nixed all celebrations of saints in Protestant worship services. The Protestants were concerned about people who believed the saints could offer prayers on their behalf. They were concerned about people praying to the saints. The Reformers/Protestants argued that Christ alone could save us and intercede for us. They argued that we should pray only to God in the name of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Later, when Protestants like us started observing All Saints' Day again, the emphasis was clearly on **“giving thanks for these saints not because of what they can do for us, but because of what Christ has already done through them. Whether we acknowledge biblical figures like Abraham or Sarah, Mark or Mary, or more recent saints like a wise parent, mentor, or teacher, we remember and are led to pray ‘all praise and thanks to God.’ That’s why even Reformed Christians (Protestants) love to sing ‘For All the Saints.’”** (from *Reformed Worship*, Issue #65 by John D. Witvliet)

The Protestants also challenged the whole definition of “saint.” Remember when I read from Philippians? Paul addresses this letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” OK, these “saints” weren’t dead when Paul was writing to them and they sure all couldn’t have been that holy, right? Later on in his letter he specifically calls two women by name and asks them to “be of the same mind,” which translated means “stop squabbling.” Apparently Paul understood the word “saint” to mean simply Christian – not a super Christian, not even a dead Christian. The writer of Hebrews also included people of God mentioned in the Old Testament in his “roll call of the saints.” These “saints” were not perfect for sure; they were loved by God; they had faith in God. The Protestants adopted these definitions of “saint.”

So, saints aren’t perfect or even exceptionally “holy” by traditional definition. Saints aren’t necessarily dead, although on All Saints’ Sunday we usually remember those who are deceased.

I had a bit of a dilemma when I was deciding about who we would honor with flowers for All Saints’ Day. (You’ll see the listing of all those who contributed the white flowers in memory of loved ones in this morning’s bulletin). Wanda had left in the ones our family honored last year: my mom and my Uncle Roland. This past year, however, my Uncle Carroll also died. In fact, the only ministerial function I performed

during my sabbatical was Uncle Carroll's graveside service. I just can't say "no" to Dad.

But, by traditional definitions Carroll really wasn't a saint. Putting him on the same list with my mother and Uncle Roland seemed at first like a slap in the face to them. You see, my Uncle Carroll did some bad things. He was wanted by the law. Many years ago, when Dan and I had first started dating, Dan was visiting at my house. The doorbell rang. We answered. It was a Federal Marshall inquiring about the whereabouts of my uncle! This was Dan's first clue of what he was getting himself into! Carroll left his family. For 30 years we didn't know if he was dead or alive. A few months before his death, my dad found out he was alive and had been living in Maryland. When my dad, and later Carroll's children, spoke with him, there was no apparent remorse.

Honestly, from the time my dad asked me, I dreaded doing the graveside service. But things became even more difficult when I spoke with the people my uncle had worked for in Baltimore for more than 20 years. "He was like a father to me. I trusted him with every aspect of our business – finances, hiring/firing of staff, everything. He was beloved by everybody. He was a great man." Were they really talking about my uncle?

I never imagined he could do anything good. They, on the other hand, never imagined he could do anything bad. Some of his high school friends with whom I spoke had been baffled for years how a wonderful Christian guy like Carroll could just disappear and change so much. Was he a saint or a sinner? Yes. Was my mom a saint or a sinner? Yes. Was my Uncle Roland a saint or a sinner? Yes. And the other folks on our list today: were they saints or sinners? Yes. They were both. And so are we.

Most of us don't have trouble accepting the "sinner" label for ourselves and others; it's the "saint" part that we find difficult to embrace. Saints are "elsewhere" after all. Most of us are busy striving and worrying. Many of us are constantly comparing ourselves to

others – the people who seem to be saints or at least more saintly than us. We struggle to accept the title “saint” because we struggle to accept grace and forgiveness. We struggle to accept that Christ, who began this good work of faith in us, is continuing to work in and through us. Christ is faithful. And Christ honors our individuality, our uniqueness, our giftedness, our passion because He created us and loves us. He who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete that good work in us – all of us.

Thomas Merton wrote: “For me to be saint means to be myself.” Pope John XXIII said that saints are those called to be “holy in a different way.” James Martin, the priest I referred to earlier, says: “For me this is tremendously encouraging. It means that being holy does not mean being someone else, or trying to be Mother Teresa or Joan of Arc. It means finding holiness in our own daily lives.”

“C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* says: ‘How monotonously alike all the great tyrants and conquerors have been: how gloriously different are the saints.’ (Martin says) “This gave me great consolation, for I realized that none of us are meant to be Saint Therese of Lisieux or Pope John XXIII or Thomas More. We’re meant to be ourselves, and meant to allow God to work in and through our individuality, our own humanity.”

Yes, traditionally defined saints are elsewhere in different faith traditions, but we can still learn much from their lives of faith. We can learn from their failures. We can learn from their acts of faith. We can learn how God worked in their lives. We can learn from them while not striving to be them. We can be inspired by them even as Christ is completing a unique and beautiful work in each of our lives.

Yes, there are saints who are elsewhere -- who are in heaven – people we’ve known and those we haven’t known. They make up the “great cloud of witnesses” who I believe are cheering us on as we run the race of life and faith, following in the footsteps of the great pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus. I’ve appreciated this image of the saints

cheering us on, especially since the death of my mother. Mom was my greatest fan in this life. It comforts me to think that perhaps she's still cheering me on. (Maybe the saints do something for us after all!)

Yes, there are saints elsewhere and there are saints right next to us. They are sinners **and** saints with whom we need to be patient and grace-filled because Christ is at work in their lives bringing to completion what He began in them. Learn from them, teach them, love them. (Now, I know you're sitting next to a spouse, or a child or a parent. I know you're sitting next to or around a fellow church member who drives you nuts. I know you may be sitting next to someone you had a fight with before you even got here today. If you're visiting with us today, you may already be thinking what a strange lot of folks this is and you're right! Saints and sinners, that's us; all of us. We are saints and sinners in whom Christ is working whether we or you believe it or not!)

Yes, there are saints elsewhere and there is a saint in you. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ, you are a saint. Be yourself. Allow God to work in and through you. Welcome the work of Christ in your life as he brings to completion the good work he started in you. You don't have to look elsewhere for saints. You are not a hopeless cause.

I would like to conclude with these words from Jude. Jude is a tiny book in the New Testament named for its writer. I don't know if he is "kin" to the Saint Jude of Hopeless Causes. Jude concludes his letter with this benediction:

"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.