

Sharing God's Blessings:  
Rejoicing in God's Saints  
Philippians 1:1-6

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Did you hear the story about two brothers who terrorized a town for decades? They were unfaithful to their wives, abusive to their children, dishonest with their customers and cheated on their income tax. Then suddenly one day the older brother died. In making arrangements for his funeral, the younger brother asked the town pastor to do the service. "And," said the surviving brother, "I insist that you refer to my brother as a saint in the funeral service." The good Reverend resisted. But when the brother advised him there was a \$100,000.00 gift for the church hanging on his decision, the pastor decided to find a way. On the day of the funeral, the pastor addressed the congregation with these words. "Everybody here today knows Joe was a wicked man. He was a womanizer, a thief, a crook, and a drunk. In spite of all his faults, compared to this younger brother, Joe was a SAINT."

It's All Saints Sunday and I take as my text Paul's salutation to the believers in this letter to the Philippians. "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.*" Who is a saint?

**SAINTS ARE PARTNERS IN THE GOSPEL.** Verses 4 and 5 say, "*I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*" Saints are those who make it easy for us to believe in God. In the Protestant tradition, saints are not patrons, they are partners. They do not stand between us and God pleading our case before the throne, they stand beside us giving us a reason for the faith that lies within us. Through the years the saints have defended the faith from heresy, and affirmed the faith in all kinds of circumstances. The faith we have today is delivered to us by the saints, those living among us and those gone before us.

Bishop Will Willimon tells the story about a fellow seminary student who challenges an Orthodox priest about particular parts of the Apostles Creed. You know that historic confession of faith which says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried."

"What," inquired the student, "can I do with tenets of that creed that I find impossible to believe? The priest replied, "Say it anyway." "But," said the student, "What if I have trouble with things like the Virgin birth, how can I say it anyway?" The priest walked up a little closer to the student and said, "Young man, how old are you—22, 23? There are a lot of things you don't know yet.

Besides it's not your creed, this is the Church's creed. It does not belong to you; it belongs to all of Christendom. Say it anyway; it will come to you sooner or later."

So today we affirm the faith delivered to us by the saints, the parts we understand, and the parts we cannot comprehend, because truth is not dependent upon our perceptions, but our participation. Saints are partners in the Gospel.

Saints are those who support the cause of Christ. Saints of Philippi are those who sent funds for the missionary work of Paul. They were partners in the Gospel. We are partners in the Gospel with Methodists in Russia. Bishop Hans Vaxby is here today to enrich that partnership.

There is a Middle Eastern story about a man riding a donkey when he came upon a sparrow lying in the road. The bird was flat on his back with both legs thrust in the air. At first, the traveler thought the bird was dead, but upon closer investigation, he discovered the bird to be very much alive. "Are you all right," inquired the traveler of the bird? "Yes," replied the bird. "Then why are you lying here on your back with your legs in the air?" "Well," said the bird, "I heard a rumor that the sky was falling so I am holding my legs up trying to keep it from happening." "You surely don't think you can hold the sky up with those scrawny legs," insisted the traveler. "Well, probably not," replied the bird, "*but one does the best he can.*"

As I heard Bishop Vaxby describe the challenges of the United Methodist Church in Russia yesterday, I felt like that little sparrow. "*Yet, we all must do the best we can.*" Partners in the Gospel—that's what a saint is—a partner in the Gospel.

**SAINTS ARE PEOPLE IN PROCESS.** In verse 6 we read, "*I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" Saints are sinners who keep on keeping on. One of our church members had spinal surgery a few weeks ago. While the surgery was successful, Pat was required to wear a large metal contraption to hold his head still affectionately called a "halo." When I went to see him in the hospital the day after surgery, Pat cracked, "I bet you never thought you would see me wearing a halo."

Most of us shy away from the word "saint." We have a lot of friends who remind us that we are "No saints." If sainthood is equated with perfection, who meets the standard? Who is qualified to judge?

What if saints are ordinary sinners trying to make good? Jesus called Peter a rock for Christianity and the Church made him a Saint. But Peter at best was a mixture of:

- Devotion and denial
- Courage and cowardice

- Faith and doubt.

Saints are the forgiven who know it, act upon it, and live by grace without angling for stained glass status in their lives. Saints are strugglers who are faithful to the end.

Being born and bred in Kentucky, the horse racing capital of the world, I am more interested in great finishers than fancy starters. I have observed through the years that the first out-of-the-gate are not usually the first across the finish-line. The real criteria in life is how will you finish—will you finish well?

It was what I refer to as a courtesy call. I visited a person in the hospital because someone in the church asked me to go. When I stepped into the room and identified myself as the pastor of Brentwood United Methodist Church, the couple in the room replied in unison, “Pastor, we don’t go to church. It wouldn’t make any difference in the way we live if we did.” I stumbled over their response and went on to conduct a pleasant pastoral visit, which I concluded with prayer. They politely thanked me for coming. Later on I got to thinking about that conversation. What I really wanted to ask, but didn’t have the nerve to ask at the time was this: “If going to church wouldn’t make any difference in the way you live, might it make any difference in the way you die? Would it make any difference how you finish?”

One of these days your name and mine will be included in the list of the dead. Maybe we will be on some church roll for All Saints Sunday. If we are lucky, perhaps a person or two will stand up as our names are called. Here’s the question:

- *When the roll is called up yonder, will I be there?*
- *When the saints go marching in, will I be in that number?*

O Lord, by your grace, make me worthy to be called a saint.

Amen.



