

## A Servant's Heart

Since it's All Saints' Sunday, I'd like to ask two questions: What's a saint? And how can we become a little more saint-like ourselves?

So, what's a saint? In the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, saints are those who have passed the ecclesiastical tests of canonization, which requires, among other things, that you first be dead. I'm not making this up—no matter how pure and holy you may be in this life, you can't be considered for sainthood until years after you're dead and buried. Mother Teresa, for example, was a revered figure, and she was Beatified in 2003; but, she's was not Canonized a saint until September 3, 2016. She died in 1997.

In the Reformed Faith, we go back to the practice of the early church and think of saints as all those who have been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians,

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God,  
to the saints who are at Ephesus...” (Ephesians 1:1)

As far as we're concerned, saints are ordinary people who've been “washed in the blood of Jesus Christ.” That is to say their sins are forgiven by the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. They're justified by grace through faith, and that means, in the words of one elder, “We're counted as righteous, even though we're not.”

The Good News is, by God's grace, we are saints. The bad news is we don't always act like it! We have been discussing attitude and behavior for several Sundays but I'd like for us to think about the true meaning of sainthood in the sermon this morning: How can we be more saint-like? What I hope to make clear is that it can be as easy as choosing a servant's heart,

Step One: Practice what you preach. Jesus warned the people in the beginning of our gospel lesson today,

“The scribes and the Pharisees sat on Moses' seat.  
All things therefore whatever they tell you to observe,

observe and do, but don't do their works;  
for they say, and don't do."(Matthew 23:2-3)

The scribes and Pharisees were legalists. They could cite every nuance of the law telling you what to do and what not to do. But they were just as guilty as everybody else when it came to keeping the law. Jesus didn't question their authority, only their integrity: "Listen to what they say, but don't follow their example because they don't practice what they preach."

We all know that actions speak louder than words. This is why, in the Letter of James, we're told to "be doers of the word, and not only hearers." (James 1:22)

A popular saying puts it this way: "You have to walk the walk if you're going to talk the talk." In other words, don't tell me, "Do as I say, not as I do." If you're not willing to do it yourself, I'm not listening!

Practice what you preach. I like the way St. Francis put it. He said, "Preach always; if necessary, use words." British born American poet, Edgar Guest, expressed this notion in a poem entitled, "Sermons We See." It begins like this:

"I'd rather see a sermon  
than hear one any day;

I'd rather one should walk with me  
than merely tell the way.

The eye's a better pupil  
and more willing than the ear,

Fine counsel is confusing,  
but example's always clear;

And the best of all the preachers  
are the [ones] who live their creeds,

For to see good put in action  
is what everybody needs."

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Practice what you preach. That's the first step. And the second step is: Don't call attention to yourself. This was Jesus' complaint of the scribes and Pharisees. He said, "Everything they do is done for men to see." That's just the opposite of what he taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. He said,

"Therefore when you do merciful deeds,  
don't sound a trumpet before yourself...  
don't let your left hand know what your right hand does...  
when you pray, enter into your inner room,  
and having shut your door...  
when you fast, don't be like the hypocrites, with sad faces..."  
(Matthew 6:2-18)

Jesus said we're to do all these things secretly without making a big fuss about it. He said that, in this way, God will reward our faithfulness.

And it's true: When you get recognition for something you've done, you're given your fifteen minutes of fame, and then it's over. As Jesus would say, "They have received their reward." (Matthew 6:2) But when you do something good without calling attention to yourself, the result is a well-deserved feeling of accomplishment that's yours to enjoy for the rest of your life.

I don't know of a better example than anonymous giving. It's a paradox: When you give anonymously, you don't get any recognition; yet, because of that, you become the recipient of an endless debt of gratitude.

Here's what I mean. A man was serving as Associate Pastor for a large church in Nashville, Tennessee. One day he got a call from the store manager of a men's clothing shop. The manager asked if he could come to the pastor's office and measure him for a new suit. "You must have the wrong person," the pastor said. The manager said there was no mistake, that one of the pastor's members had ordered a tailor-made suit for him, and that the tailor needed to take his measurements. You can probably guess the next question: "Who?" "I'm not at liberty to say," the manager

said. “The donor wishes to remain anonymous.” The pastor was assured that it was all on the up-and-up.

Well, he took the pastor’s measurements, and, in a few weeks, he delivered the suit, and it was the nicest suit the pastor had ever worn. For weeks, he’d surveyed the congregation on Sunday morning trying to figure out who gave him the suit. He came up with several possibilities. He’d say to himself, “It’d be just like so and so – it’d be just like her – to do such a thing.” He’d look for a smile or nod or some slight indication that he was right. But it never came. He never solved the mystery. He never knew who to thank.

So he thanked God instead, not once, but over and over. And still thanks God, though the suit has, long since, been recycled. But, when you think about it, that’s the point: To give anonymously is to be part of the *generosity* of God’s grace and love. It’s to live without calling attention to yourself. When you do, you find your place in the kingdom of God.

Let’s review: Step one, practice what you preach; step two, don’t call attention to yourself. Step three, take a back seat. This is what Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees:

“They... love the place of honor at feasts,  
the best seats in the synagogues,  
the salutations in the marketplaces,  
and to be called ‘Rabbi, Rabbi’ by men.” (Matthew 23:5-7)

One of my favorite sayings is, “many who are first will be last; and the last first.” (Mark 10:31) it comes in handy at fellowship suppers: No, you go ahead. I’ll bring up the rear. Just remember:

“Many who are first will be last;  
and the last first.”

All kidding aside, it’s true: Those who take a back seat, who open the door for others, who lose themselves in *service* of the common good experience a greater joy than those who don’t. For one thing, they’re relieved of the stress and strain of competing for the best portions and, in so doing, they’re more likely to be content with what they have.

Be honest: When you were a kid, did you ever push and shove to be first at the water fountain after recess? I'm ashamed to say I did. The water fountain had a small tank and there was only so much cold water to dispense. Once that ran out, everyone else got water straight from the tap.

So, how did the other kids feel about drinking tepid water? I could've cared less. I was only interested in quenching my own thirst. Thankfully, I've grown up, at least in part. Oh, I still think about satisfying my own appetites, but not nearly as much as I once did. And I'm pretty sure if I were ever to be totally Christ-like, I wouldn't be concerned about my own needs at all.

The truth is the more you take a back seat, the more the back seat becomes the front seat, because those who put others first are given a place of honor that can never be taken away.

Years ago, we raised money for the PTA by selling magazine subscriptions. Remember that? As incentive, prizes were awarded to those who sold the most. Joe was in the seventh grade, and one of the top prizes was an X-ACTO knife set. It had a fancy handle and several interchangeable blades for wood carving. It was just perfect for cutting balsa wood to make model airplanes, which was one of Joe's hobbies at the time.

He wanted that X-ACTO knife set worse than anything in the world. So, everyday after school he'd canvass the neighborhoods walking up and down the streets knocking on doors selling magazine subscriptions. And he was good. He made a lot of sales, so that, when the day came to announce the winners and hand out the prizes, Joe figured he had a good chance of being the most sales and getting his pick of the prizes which, of course, was that X-ACTO knife set.

Mrs. Jones was the Principal. She had the teachers herd all the students into the auditorium where they sat and waited to see who'd won. She praised us for doing a good job and then she called the top three students with the highest sales to the stage. Joe was one of them. As it turned out, Joe came in second. Frank Foster sold the most subscriptions, so he got first pick of the prizes.

Joe will never forget what Frank did. He knew Joe had his eyes on that X-ACTO knife set. So, he walked to the table and looked over all the prizes, then he picked up the X-ACTO set and looked at it. Joe could have died. Frank turned to Joe and smiled, then he put it back on the table and took another prize, leaving the X-ACTO set for me.

As long as Joe lives, he'll always remember Frank's kindness and how he took a back seat that day. And Joe can tell you this: As far as he's concerned, Frank will always have a seat at the front of the class.

Friends, remember this: You are a saint ... not because you're good or perfect or, in any way, deserving. You're a saint because Christ died for you. Your sins are washed clean by the "blood of the lamb." What God wants is for you to become more saint-like, and that's as easy as remembering we are called to be servants for Christ:

1. Practice what you preach.
2. Don't call attention to yourself.
3. Take a back seat.

Do these things and you'll find yourself in the company of all the saints and martyrs who have gone before you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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## Matthew 23:1-12 New International Version

### A Warning Against Hypocrisy

**23** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: <sup>2</sup> “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. <sup>3</sup> So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

<sup>5</sup> “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries<sup>[a]</sup> wide and the tassels on their garments long; <sup>6</sup> they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; <sup>7</sup> they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

<sup>8</sup> “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

### Footnotes

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## 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 New International Version

<sup>9</sup> Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. <sup>10</sup> You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. <sup>11</sup> For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, <sup>12</sup> encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

<sup>13</sup> And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

< [1 Thessalonians 1](#)

[1 Thessalonians 3](#) >

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