

## **Con Piu Brio (Sing it Again, This Time Like You Mean It)**

**Preached by**

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**United Church of Fayetteville**

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**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** based on Isaiah 43:1-21

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, he who formed you:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior,

<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

<sup>20</sup>The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches;

for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert,

to give drink to my chosen people, <sup>21</sup>the people whom I formed for myself

so that they might declare my praise.

**Epistle Reading:** Ephesians 4:7, 11-16

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

**Meditation**

***Con Piu Brio***

*(Sing It Again, This Time Like You Mean it!)*

November 1 is All Saints' Day—the church's Memorial Day, when we remember all the faithful who have died, and yet who are in communion with us now, by the power of memory, with the inheritance of faith they have bequeathed to us and in sharing this meal with us.

Let's consider what we might know or think we know about saints? Who are the saints? Do they have to be mentioned in the Bible? Dead? How about perfect? Died a gruesome death? Performed miracles –before or after their deaths? We refer to Saint Paul or Saint Luke, but isn't Saint just their first name? Why are we taking this quiz anyway? Isn't it only the Christian Catholic tradition that believes in saints?

If this were a quiz, how would we have scored? My guess is not too well. As it turns out, for the faithful—saints are not among the usual suspects who may fit some or all of the criteria suggested in the quiz.

Since the Reformation, we Protestants have had a complex relationship with saints. We have been taught that it is idolatry to show reverence to the saints, so we might well wonder about what we do in this day in our worship. We reject the practices of acknowledging saints' days or patron saints (except of course for St. Nicholas?). And because, we have rejected this particular religious practice, we are likely less aware of the Biblical understanding of sainthood—an understanding that pervades the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.

Listen again to Paul's words ...

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... Each of us was given a gift of grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were ... to equip the saints for ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Paul did not define the stars, leaders, martyrs, preachers, teachers or prophets as saints. He said everyone was given a gift of grace to use for the building up of the church. He said everyone in the church is a saint.

Our experience makes it hard for us to believe in saints. No one is that good. Even the most heroic, the most faithful of people can have feet of clay. Martin Luther King may have repainted the vision of our future as a nation, but he didn't footnote well. Mother Teresa lived a remarkable and sacrificial life, but years-long depression darkened her spirit. Should we encounter someone who apparently meets the criteria of sainthood—a nebulous set of criteria, but typically includes tolerating something the rest of us cannot imagine enduring by choice—poverty, pain, frustration, danger or humiliation or simply honoring service over entertainment or self-satisfaction—we minimize them or their motivations.

Calling someone a saint can be the occasion for writing off the challenge they present to us and to our way of life. By suggesting saints as "not normal," we excuse ourselves by saying they have received extraordinary gifts from God, such as we can never hope to have. As a result, we define saints as ones who are not relevant to the way the rest of the world lives. If they had a life, as the offensive phrase puts it, they wouldn't have time to feed the poor, be a medical missionary or visit the homebound.

Dismissing people like Paul of Tarsus, Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa may leave us with niggles of doubt. The possibility of their sainthood may linger, but that sad truth is that most of those we encounter leave us with no such doubt, no sense of possibility. It is more often our lot that those we meet are no holier than we are: if being holy means being super-human; if being holy means having no personal needs; if being holy means being perfect.

Yet, the church has never taught that those who are holy, that those who are saints, are perfect. John Calvin wrote, "For the church fathers well knew that the saints often totter in unbelief, sometimes give vent to superfluous oaths, now and then flare into anger, indeed even break out into open railing and are besides troubled with other ills that the Lord thoroughly abominates." There is nothing in that description that excludes me or anyone in this community of faith from the company of saints.

But if we have a complex intellectual relationship with the idea of sainthood, we perhaps have an even more complex emotional one. That dual response is perhaps best reflected in our All Saint's Day remembrances—moments of silence and solemnity, perhaps grief and loss balanced,

counter-balanced or tipped out of balance by the beloved, joyful and energetic music of the day. Yet one without the other seems lacking.

We both want and do not want to be considered saints. Despite Calvin's words, we fear that we would have to be sweeter, nicer and more patient than is human capacity. Perhaps we are afraid others would have expectations of us or worse yet, we would have expectations of ourselves. We acknowledge all the benefits of being called and living like saints. We'd like ourselves. Others would speak well of us. We would be in good shape with the Lord when the final judgement comes. We'd like to be more saintly. It's just that, well, it doesn't sound like any fun. So our prayers wind up sounding like that of early church father, St. Augustine, who prayed: "Lord, give me freedom from desire, ... but not yet." "Lord, make me a saint. Make us saints. But not yet." We don't want to be living saints, but we'd like people to remember us that way after we are dead.

Yet, each one of us was given a gift of grace ... to equip the saints for ministry... -- Paul's words remind us that it is too late for such a prayer. We are already made saints. Saints are simply people who belong to God and therefore have received God's gifts of grace.

In the tradition of the Church in the World and our own faith heritage, we not only believe in saints—we believe we are saints, and proclaim a vision of the church as a community of saints. Certainly, because it was Biblical. But perhaps for another reason. Perhaps because our lives would be far less rich without such a vision. To lose our awareness of the sainthood of believers, would be to lose our awareness of all that is holy and present among us—Christ's gifts to each of us—in those around us and in ourselves.

We do not need to pray, "Lord, make us saints." We don't have to perform any task to become a saint. We have joined the body of Christ. We don't have to wait for a vote or trial to be named a saint. We have been baptized. We are named and made saints in Christ. What is left is not for us to achieve holiness, but to make evident in our lives the holiness which has been instilled in us. Paul begs us and God begs us "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called."

Our lives are easier when, without heroes, without saints, we have no standards against which to measure ourselves, no outside influences on that which we proudly call our self-development. Yet, on this Sunday, when we lift up in solemn memory the names of those, now in eternal relationship with God, we are not holding second funerals. We are reminding ourselves that we have such heroes, such witnesses, such saints among us who have influenced our developments as Christians. We are singing of the glories of their lives and faith and gifts to this community, with fervor and love and thanksgiving and joy, not because they are no longer with us as they once were, but because they are with us always in all their gifts and graces, flaws and failings.

While weeping in loss is human and is faithful, it is not with the volume of our wailing that we honor their memories. We honor their memories and their gifts to us by living as they lived, as Paul and God in Christ call us to live with the standards of their witness in front of us, urging us onward and upward. On this Sunday, in honor of all the saints of the church, let us remember, that we, no less than they, are recipients of God's grace. We, no less than they, are saints.