

**It's Not About Dying**  
Preached by  
Rev. Linda D. Even  
United Church of Fayetteville  
November 7, 2021

**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.  
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.  
For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
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.  
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, the people whom I formed for myself  
so that they might declare my praise.

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

<sup>7</sup>But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift... <sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>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:** *It's Not About the Dying*

I have officiated at nearly 200 funerals in my career. With one notable exception, during each pastoral meeting with family members prior to the service, someone said to me, "My mother [father, sister, brother, wife, husband] was no saint." In the one exception, I met with four siblings. Before we had even completed introductions, the eldest looked pointedly at everyone else, then at me and said, "Let's be clear. My mother was a saint." That meeting was, I believe, the singularly least effective grief work I have ever done with a family. I strongly suspect that even today that family is struggling with the death of their mother because they were not able to even acknowledge her imperfect life, let alone come to terms with it.

Those kinds of comments are extremely common and reflect one misunderstanding many of us have about sainthood—i.e. that it refers to those who move moved flawlessly, without struggle through life, sacrificially generous, never annoying or putting a foot wrong—perhaps even people who do what no "rational person would do"—in other words, suggesting that saints are perfect superhuman people. It is with that image in mind, we often seek to absolve ourselves of our own responsibilities and obligations by announcing, "I'm no saint." However, scriptural references are not about perfection or

martyrdom or other extraordinary witness to the faith. Paul addressed many of his letters, as he did this one “To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus...” If we have some idea that he was singling out a few in a congregation or there was some subtext of “and the rest of the rabble among you,” we are mistaken. His address is consistent with scriptural references—to be a saint is simply to be among those who are among the company of the faithful.

The other misunderstanding in speaking of saints, perhaps develops because, on All Saints Day, as we do here on All Saints Sunday, the church in the world has the frequent practice of remembering her dead, dedicating memorials and placing a significant focus on those we mourn. As a result, we tend to forget what we do is not about the dying but about the living of those faithful lives. We tend to forget that we are remembering people for the lives they lived, for the gifts and graces they had shared with the world, and not for something they may or may not have turned into after death. We forget that we honor our dead, not solely by remembering them, but by committing to do what they did—with the gifts and graces we have been given. One need not be dead to be a saint. As a matter of fact, in 65 scriptural citations of saints, not one refers to the dead.

In *The Undertaking*, Thomas Lynch’s collection of marvelous, elegantly written essays on grief, mourning, death and life, he addresses these two misconceptions: “... being a dead saint is no more worthwhile than being a dead philodendron or a dead angelfish. Living is the rub, and always has been. Living saints still feel the flames and stigmata of this vale of tears, the ache of chastity and the pangs of conscience.”

The good news for the faithful is that we don’t have to be perfect to be saints; nor do we have to be dead. It may also be bad news for us, for there go all our excuses for failing to live up to the promise of our God-given graces and expectations of our faith. To the degree that we discount the people we call saints as either dead or perfect, we demean their struggles, their commitments and their fullest expression of the gifts and graces with which they had been bestowed. We may also be attempting to discount our own abilities to be faithful, lest it be expected of us. But the truth is this: Like it or not, we—alive, flawed, occasionally frustrated or angry, generous or not, we, oh so human beings are the saints of God.

Paul’s letter makes it clear that it is God’s intention to work with us just as we are. As he does in a number of letters, Paul indicates that the faithful are given various gifts. By extension, we may assume that one result of this gracious gift-giving, of some people being gifted for some things, others for different ones, means that we are also lacking in some gifts. Nowhere, does Paul suggest that those of us who have been given one gift should strive for other others, so that we might become totally sufficient unto ourselves for a life of faith. Nowhere does he suggest that individuals can reach maturity of faith or grow into the full stature of Christ.

Rather, Paul’s consistent message is that God calls us to live in communities among differently gifted human beings like ourselves, so that **TOGETHER** we might be built up in love.

For, just as the story of creation affirms that it is not good for us to live alone and that we were created to be in relationship with others, the New Testament message about the life of faith is that community is not merely an option—it is a necessity. God created us differently so that we might need one another. For it is only **TOGETHER** that we can reach maturity and the full stature of Christ.

There is no way around it—from the earliest age to our own, we are called to muddle along **TOGETHER**, celebrating gifts, building up one another in love and being the body of Christ in the world.

Scripture is full of stories of God who works through the glorious, gifted, flawed humanity of the faithful for God’s own purposes. If God can live with us, love us and work through us, because of and in spite of our humanity, surely, we can live, work and love with one another. Sainthood is not about the dying. It’s not just about the living of our individual lives. Sainthood is also about how we live together.