

**“Thanksgiving for the Saints”**  
**Philippians 1:3-8, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 2 Timothy 1:3-5**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston  
All Saints Sunday – November 6, 2005

**Paul called them “saints.”** To be canonized today – to be given the official title of “saint” – you have to be dead for five years and you have to perform at least two miracles *after* your death. <sup>1</sup> Not an easy task.

But Paul didn’t wait until they had been dead for five years. And in Paul’s day, the only miracle required to be called “a saint” was the miracle of faith.

These particular saints were the faithful from Phillipi and Thessalonika – two fledgling churches in Greece – along with a young believer named “Timothy” whom Paul called “his beloved child.” He was not literally Paul’s child of course. (Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother named Eunice who had converted to Christianity along with her mother, Lois – Timothy’s grandmother.<sup>2</sup>)

They were saints – not because of what they did, not because of the miracles they achieved. They were saints because they were trying to be holy.

Sometimes they weren’t trying very hard. And Paul wrote this letter not only to thank them for their faithfulness but to encourage them to continue to be faithful.

But at their core, the saints wanted to be different. They wanted *the world* to be different.

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Since Rosa Parks died 13 days ago, she has been lovingly remembered across the nation and world. Rosa Parks was the 31<sup>st</sup> person to lie in state under the Capitol dome. She was eulogized in Washington and in Detroit with thousands of people paying tribute to her, and *the hagiography* has been rampant. You know the word “hagiography”? It involves idealizing someone; turning them into a saint.

We especially do this when someone we love dies. Because we miss them so much, we lift them up and canonize them – at least for a little while. We remember only their best qualities.

Suddenly, in the past two weeks we have seen Rosa Parks’ picture everywhere: Being finger-printed in Montgomery. Sitting on a bus. Receiving the Medal of Freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the process of canonization in the Roman Catholic Church (making someone a saint) The five year requirement has been waived for both Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 16:1-3.

Oprah Winfrey called her “the personification of grace and goodness.” Cicely Tyson said that Rosa Parks knew that “King Jesus was her driver and she was not to move.”<sup>3</sup> Bill Clinton said that she radiated serenity.<sup>4</sup> Gwen Stefani dedicated a song to her at a recent concert.

We have taken this woman and lifted her to sainthood, and -- I believe – rightly so. But Rosa Parks was not perfect. She was a saint of God to be sure. But she was not perfect.

Maybe Rosa Parks was chronically late returning library books. Maybe she lost her temper with her nurses. Maybe she took the Lord’s name in vain when she pricked her finger with a needle in her dress-making days. We just don’t know. But the past week was not about considering those things. It was about remembering *the way God used her* to make the world better. It was about remembering *the holy things* about her. Hagiography.

The word “hagiography” comes from the Greek word *hagios* which means “a most holy thing; a saint.” This is the word that Paul used to describe the Christians in Philippi and Thessalonika. They were *saints* – *hagios*. And this is not to say that they were perfect. All we have to do is read through these books and see that they still had some things to work on.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians and the Thessalonians to keep the holy fires stoked, to keep these new Christians on the right track. Since he was in prison and could not visit them, he sent them letters to cheer them on. And he would be sending Timothy and a man named Epaphroditus to continue to bolster their faith.<sup>6</sup>

Being a saint doesn’t mean we are perfect. It means we are trying. We are trying to be holy. We are trying to live as God created us to live.

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As we have received new members today, as I look out across these pews, I see people in completely different places in your spiritual journey. Some are lifelong Christians sure of God’s place in your life. Some have serious doubts, are not sure what you believe. Some are here against their will perhaps – hoping to support someone else’s faith.

But one thing is certain about all of us in this room: all of us had someone who modeled faith to us. The Thessalonians and the Philippians had Paul and Paul’s disciple,

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<sup>3</sup> From the transcript of the memorial service at the Metropolitan AME Church in Washington, DC. on November 1, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> From the transcript of the funeral service in Detroit on November 3, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Thessalonians 3:10

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:19, 25.

Timothy. And in the first verses of Paul's second letter to Timothy, we see that Timothy's faith was influenced by his mother and grandmother.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I'd love to know how many of you are here today because of *the seeds of faith* planted inside you by your parents or your grandparents. I suspect that many of us had parents and grandparents who took us to church, who read Bible stories to us, who modeled what a faithful life looks like.

We are living in a time when this is not as prevalent as it has been in past generations. We are living in a time when the majority of our neighbors are probably not in church. They might be on a soccer field. They might be sleeping in. They might be at work.

Most importantly, they might not have anyone to model what it looks like to be a Christian. They might not have anyone to model what it looks like to be a Christian . . . except for us.

If they knew we were coming to worship this morning, would they be surprised? Have they witnessed us doing "holy things"? Have they caught us being generous or forgiving or loving or inspiring? **Have they caught modeling Christ-like behavior in their midst?**

We remember Rosa Parks because she was modeling Christ-like behavior. Yes, she was breaking the law the day she sat on one of the first ten rows of that bus in Montgomery, Alabama, but you might remember that Jesus was arrested for breaking the law too. Sedition was his crime.

And Paul was arrested for causing trouble among the Jews – claiming that Jesus was his LORD.

I suspect that *our* crime is that we haven't lived as if Jesus is our LORD. At least, that's *my* crime.

- We haven't always stood up for the poor.
- We haven't always trusted that God loves us and knows what's best.
- We haven't always had the faith to take a leap and go where God is nudging us to go.

Saints are not people who are perfect. We are people who are *trying*. We are people who need encouragement – and that's why we're here. That's why we take the bread and cup – in the hope that we will be spiritually fortified.

That's why we look for models and leaders who will inspire us. But the next step is to be an inspiration to someone else. Timothy was inspired by his mother, Eunice and

his grandmother, Lois. But then he was sent to inspire the saints in Phillipi and Thessalonika.

In closing, I want to know who here remembers a man named James F. Blake who died in 2002? Anybody know that name?

James F. Blake was a bus driver who reported Rosa Parks to the police. She had had a run in with him about ten years before when he had gruffly spoken to her on a different bus at a different time. At that time, she had reported *him* to the authorities. Mr. Blake never was reconciled with Mrs. Parks and we generally don't remember his name because instead of lifting up people, he apparently took joy in pushing people down. It's not always the case that we forget the names of the infamous, but I'm glad most of us don't know this name.

In a few moments, we will lift up the names of people who have inspired and brought joy. They were not perfect. But they were God's children and we loved them. The youngest on this list was 6 months old, and the oldest were in their 80s. As we remember them, this is a great opportunity to assess how *we* are doing as saints of God. **Has anyone caught us being saints lately?**