

Ephesians 1:11-22

1:11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason 16 I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. 17 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. 20 God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. 22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ...

ALL SAINTS DAY

Last Monday was All Saints day. Did you celebrate? Did you have your traditional All Saints barbecue and picnic? Maybe you opted for an All Saints party?

No? You didn't? You missed a great opportunity!

Actually I'm not surprised.

This is a holiday that is more important in the Roman Catholic Church, and unfortunately it doesn't lend itself to raucous celebration. Most of us prefer to celebrate Halloween with its candy and costumes.

But, some do take sainthood seriously.

In the Catholic Church the choosing of saints is a lengthy process. Saints are chosen by a careful analysis of a person's life. Whatever they wrote and whatever they did is evaluated to see if they qualify for this honor.

We in the Protestant church find such a detailed process hard to understand and perhaps a bit exotic. We prefer to say that we personally are not saints and that our life would certainly not bear up under such close scrutiny.

However, we can think of some people who might qualify for such an honor. Perhaps we remember an especially loving relative or church member who was remarkably faithful. Of that person we would say something like, "If ever there was a saint, she was one. If anyone is in heaven, she's there."

In this way we do informally what the Roman Catholic Church has done in a more formal way. We suggest that a saint is chosen by his or her peers for this honor, and the criteria used is the relative goodness or badness of that person's life. It is an honor most often, if not always, bestowed after a person has died.

That's shouldn't surprise you. There's this natural tendency to make the dearly departed almost inhumanly saintly after they are gone.

SAINTS IN THE BIBLE

I wonder if we shouldn't just drop All Saints Day from the church calendar altogether? Perhaps this celebration is not appropriate for a denomination that talks about the pervasiveness of human sin. Total depravity and sainthood just don't seem to go together.

What would Calvin say about all this?

But, despite the fact that we don't celebrate All Saints Day, the date is on the official Presbyterian calendar. And though we don't emphasize this holiday, we do use the word saint quite a bit.

For example in the Apostle's Creed we talk about the "communion of saints." I did a quick word search on my computer and the word "saints" (always plural) comes up 62 times in the New Testament.

So, we cannot say that the concept of saints is just a creation of the medieval church. It is a solid biblical concept.

But, our understanding of sainthood is often informed more by popular culture than biblical knowledge.

Today we will remedy that; we will learn who the saints are, how they are chosen and the reason that we might want to call someone a saint.

ARE YOU A SAINT?

Whenever I talk about the “saints,” my mind goes back the summer internship that I took after my first year of seminary. I served a venerable old church just out of Huntersville, NC.

Folks there were proud of the fact that many buried in their churchyard fought in the Revolutionary War. Tradition ran deep and strong.

There were several former ministers who worshiped in that church, and one delighted in a good-natured test of the summer interns. He asked in a big booming voice, “Son, are you a saint?”

I’m sure that many answered meekly, “Sir, I try my best, but I’m not saint.” But I knew what he was getting at. I stood tall and said firmly, “Sir, I’m proud to say that I am a saint.”

At that point a grin broke out on the old man’s face, and he said, “It’s good to meet someone who reads the Bible.”

You see, according to the Bible, a saint is not a perfect person. A saint is not even one who received the acclaim of his friends and family. A saint is a person chosen by God for salvation in Jesus Christ.

So, if you are believer in Jesus Christ, you are a saint. If you are a Christian, it means that God has chosen you. You are His child. He is your Father.

SAINTS BUT NOT SAINTLY

Now does this mean that you are better than others, more saintly? Not at all. Does this mean that God saw potential in you that you have some unique talents that He needs? Not at all

In fact just the opposite may be the case. The Bible tells us that God often chooses what is foolish and weak in the world for a reason. God wants to make it plain that the power lies in the gospel and not in the talent of those proclaiming the gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 1:27 we read, “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”

The fact that we are saints doesn’t make us saintly. In fact, if we look at the behavior of many saints, saints being defined as those who are called by Christ to be His disciples, we see that their halos were considerably tarnished.

So, God doesn't choose us on account of our righteousness. God doesn't choose us because we show potential. In Ephesians 1:11 we read that God chooses us, he predestines us "according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ..."

There is an old limerick that goes something like this, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." But, of course we believe that God did indeed choose the Jews. Did that mean that the Jews were perfect? Hardly. The whole Old Testament can be seen as a testament to just how imperfect and willful a people can be.

But, despite that, the Jews were God's chosen people. Despite their faults, God used his people to bring a message of salvation and prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

Indeed, the failures of those first saints that pointed out the need for a new kind of salvation. Salvation could not be achieved by following the law. If salvation were going to come to God's people it would have to come by grace through faith.

Those first saints failed in many ways. They were unfaithful at every turn. They lost hope.

But, God did not fail. God remained faithful to his people and promised a new day of salvation, a salvation that would extend beyond the chosen people to the whole world.

I am grateful that the saints of old were not perfect or even near perfect. I identify with their weaknesses and their failures. And I think that if God could use them, then perhaps God really could use me as well.

HOW TO BECOME A SAINT

Frederick Buechner in a discussion of saints wrote that saints are "men and women who are made not out of plaster and platitudes and moral perfection but out of human flesh." Saints are those "who have their rough edges and their blind spots like everyone else, but whose lives are transparent to something so extraordinary that every so often it stops us dead in our tracks."

That's the key. Saints lead lives that are "transparent to something so extraordinary that every so often it stops us dead in our tracks."

Saints are saints in Christ. And the power of God is made manifest through them.

How does this happen? Listen again to what Paul told the Ephesians in verse 13,

“In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit ...”

This verse gives us a detailed account of the process by which one becomes a saint. It does not occur through the mysterious workings of church councils. It does not occur through the veneration of family and friends.

It occurs through three things: hearing the word of truth, believing that word, and receiving the promised Holy Spirit.

In other words, when we read the Bible and believe the message in a personal way, the Holy Spirit confirms in our hearts that God has indeed chosen us to be his children in Christ Jesus. We come to believe that we too are included in the company of saints.

CHOSEN AND CHANGED

Do you believe God has chosen you? If you do your life will be changed forever.

Do you remember the last time someone chose you to do something special? If we are chosen we feel accepted and valued. If we are not chosen the opposite can be true.

I had a friend who grew up playing stickball on the mean streets of New York City. He said that it was very dangerous to be chosen last for a game of stickball. The kids were unmerciful in their teasing.

I know what he means. When I was a boy I was chosen last for some games and I felt terrible about it. But, in some sports I was chosen first, and that felt very good.

To be chosen for an honor or for a position on a sports team or for a prestigious job gives you a very good feeling. If we're chosen, we have a good self-image. We gain confidence. Our life reflects the power of being chosen.

We've just seen a national example of how being chosen can change a person's life. We've chosen new leaders for our country. Those who were chosen were filled with a sense of pride and optimism. The party continued into the wee hours of the morning.

And those who were not chosen looked totally deflated, and everyone went home early.

There is no reason for anyone to go home deflated this morning because I have good news.

God has chosen us. We are a part of God's plan. And God has a job for us to do.

CHOSEN FOR SPECIAL SERVICE

When I was in college a rabbi came to our very Baptist school to talk about the Jewish faith. He said, "We are God's chosen people. But, we are chosen not for special honor. We are chosen for special service."

I think this is a good way to talk about our calling in Christ Jesus. We are saints. We are called according to the purposes of God. But, we are not called for special honor. We are called for special service.

During the reign of Oliver Cromwell there was a shortage of currency in the British Empire. Representatives carefully searched the nation in hopes of finding silver to meet the emergency.

After one month the committee returned with its report. They said, "We have searched the Empire in vain seeking to find silver. To our dismay, we found none anywhere except in the cathedrals where the statues of the saints are made out of choice silver."

Cromwell quickly replied, "Well, let's melt down the saints and put them into circulation."

And therein lies my saintly stewardship connection.

Saints are meant to be melted down and put into circulation. All of us need to use the blessings God has given us so that we can fulfill our purpose.

And that purpose is to proclaim the gospel of God as revealed in Jesus. We proclaim that God loves us. We proclaim that God brings us forgiveness and hope.

In the crucible of life the heat often melts us. But, God uses the heat of life for His own purposes. God re-forms us and puts us back into circulation.

PROMISED POWER

The biggest thing that stops us from dedicating our life to the Lord is a sense that we have no power. We think that we have nothing to offer. We say,

“I’m not that talented. I’m not that wealthy.”

To that God replies,

“Oh really? You are a saint called according to my purpose. I will give you what you need to do the job. What you need to do is take what you have and dedicate it to my service.”

This is the great insight that we all need to understand.

Paul told the Ephesians that if the eyes of their hearts were enlightened they would be transformed. They had an inheritance in heaven that would start changing the way they lived here and now.

Resurrection power is alive and well even today. (Ephesians 1:18-20.)

The saints of God surround us, and they cheer us on as we run the race that is set out for us. (Hebrews 12:1)

SAINTS WE DO NOT KNOW

When Fred Craddock returned to his hometown to care for his terminally ill sister, he found a church to attend on Sunday evening. Craddock actually attended the little church in his youth.

When he arrived that evening the sun was shining through the stained glass windows.

He asked a friend,

“Those windows are beautiful. But, how could this small church afford such beautiful windows? I looked at the nameplates on those windows and didn’t recognize any of the names. Did you get some wealthy members since I used to come here?”

His friend answered, “Well, there was a church up in St. Louis that ordered new windows from a company in Italy. When the windows arrived they were not the right size. So, the company in Italy asked the church to try and sell the windows while they made some new ones.

Well, that church advertised the windows and we bought them. That's why you don't recognize any of the names. They're the names of people who used to attend that church in St. Louis.

Craddock asked, "Are you going to change the nameplates?"

And the friend replied, "We talked about that at our board meeting, and decided to leave those names on the window."

"Why?" asked Craddock?

The friend replied, "It's good for our church to know that there are a lot of saints in God's kingdom that we don't even know."

That's a good thing for us to know too. There are a lot of saints in God's kingdom that we don't even know. But, we do know this. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is still at work in our world today.

I would draw your attention to the words of our anthem for today, My Offering. (They're printed on the back of your bulletin.) Those words are about how God's power can work through our little lives. The smallest offering in God's hands can make a big difference.

[First service only]

[Take a few moments to read those words as Mark plays the melody to the anthem that the choir will sing at the second service. And then come forward to bring your pledge.]

[Second service only]

[Mark will play the melody while you read the words and the choir comes down to the communion table to make their pledge. Then the choir will return to their places and sing while you come and make your pledge.]

If you aren't prepared to pledge today or if you're not a member of this church, we invite you to come forward anyway and touch the communion table as a way to remember that you are a saint.

You have been called according to God's promises. God has called you to life filled with power and hope.

Trust in that promise. Commit your life and your resources to that calling.

Let us now make our commitment to God.

Amen.