

Lamplighting!

Ephesians 1: 11-23

Today is All Saints Sunday; the Sunday in the church year that we especially celebrate saints. Now, if you've ever looked up a list of noted saints, you've probably readily agreed that some on that list made sense; such as a St. Francis, or a Mother Teresa. These fit our common image of saints and sainthood. Then again, you may well have noted a few others who made you wonder, "How'd they make the list?" They just don't fit the standard image of saintly. So, it might be well to ask two questions this morning: just who is a saint, and what are the signs of the saintly life? The answers to those two questions show up in this morning's Epistle lesson from the Letter to the Ephesians.

So, let's begin by answering that first question: just who is a saint? A memorable episode of the comic strip "Peanuts," goes after this very question. Here, Lucy informs Charlie Brown, "I have examined my life and found it to be without a flaw. Therefore, I'm going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving acceptance speech. After that, I'll greet myself in the receiving line." Then she concludes, with a sigh, "When you're a saint, you have to do everything yourself."

Lucy has just expressed a common misconception about saints. She equates saintliness with perfection. But this is not the Biblical thought. The word saint, as used in the Bible, applies to anyone who belongs to God, and who follows Jesus. Most of the New Testament letters are addressed to the saints in various places to which they are written. Simply put, a saint is someone, anyone, who follows Jesus, and is part of a body of believers. This hardly means that they are perfect. They are still human. It means, rather, that at their baptism, with the pouring of the water and the sealing with chrism, they received the power of the Holy Spirit into their lives. God has become their controlling agent, helping them to grow in living holy lives as Christians. This is why they

are called saints; they are on the path toward the goal of a holy life; not for already being there.

Another way to think of it is a bit like the furniture in our homes. There are times, no doubt, when we all look at the things we own and note that most everything we have is flawed in some way: the table that has a small chip taken out of its top, a victim of the movers and packers; the couch that is stained from spilled coffee and peanut butter and jelly; the dresser that rocks slightly as the drawers are opened or closed. There's that small crack in the mirror, the oil leak in the car, the loose handle on the letter opener...and on it goes.

Likewise, when we look at ourselves, we become aware of the same sorts of flaws. We see the cracks of meanness, the scratches of jealousy, the occasional fanaticism, bigotry, vengeance, and all the inner blemishes of the mind, the chips in our character, the nicks in our relationships, the rockiness in our commitments, the breaks in our promises.

Yet, in spite of all these failures and flaws, you and I are still saints, in the Biblical sense. It's not about perfection; we are, all of us, far from it. But in following Jesus we are going in the right direction. Saints are those who have determined to follow the path, the way of Jesus, and with his help are seeking to travel it. So, if you belong to God, and you do belong to God if you are seeking to follow Jesus, you are a saint! So, that answers our first question of who is a saint. You are!

Now let's answer the other question: what are the signs of the saintly life? There are three saint signs: faith, love, and hope. The first two are found in verse 15 where the writer says, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints," he writes, "and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers"

SaintSign 1: *Faith: faith in Jesus.* That means trusting that Jesus is the way to God, and it means taking that faith seriously enough to follow him and seek his way as a life-long journey. That's what saints do, plain and simple — they follow Jesus on the way to God.

SaintSign 2: *Love: love toward all the saints.* How do you love as a saint? Through love and concern for others that is demonstrated by acts of practical service. Providing relief for the needy is of critical importance, both within the church community, and in the community at large. As Paul writes to the Romans, “Contribute to the needs of the saints,” and, “extend hospitality to strangers” (Romans 12:13). Today, as in the earliest days of the church, love needs to be more than a word, more than an emotion, it needs to be an act of practical service.

SaintSign 3: *Hope: hope that God is always leading, and just ahead.* This is found in verses 17-19, “I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, ...may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation... so that...you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...” The saints are people who live in hope that God is always leading them, and just ahead as the path of faith leads them on into the future and eternity.

There they are; three signs of the saintly life: faith, hope, and love; these three. (Hmmm...that sound familiar somehow...) Living these three is how we live that life.

For me, the most inspiring image of a saint is this description by John Ruskin. John Ruskin was an Oxford Don and a Victorian age social critic in the 19th Century. Though most of what he wrote is largely forgotten, he is still famous for his reflection on sainthood. He was looking out his house window one night, peering into the deep darkness of his pre-electric age city. Suddenly, the gas streetlamps lining his street were almost mysteriously beginning to flame up one by one in a long

succession. From his window Ruskin could not see the lamplighter, but he could follow his route by the lights left burning behind. “This,” he said, “is what I mean by being a saint. You can trace their course by the lights they leave burning.”

That’s an image for the saintly life: a faith that gives light to guide others to the path of life, a love that restores and heals all along that path, and a hope that kindles the flame of trust in the one who goes before us.

Spreading light with the power of faith, hope, and love; that is what makes for the saintly life. Spreading light is the wonderful expectation for your life and mine, for you and I are saints.