

Sermon "Saints-How to be One" Nov. 1, 2009, Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO 80222

Today, Nov. 1 is All Saints Day. So what is a saint? The word is from the Latin, "sanctus" which means "holy" or "consecrated." In the Hebrew Bible, holiness characterized God, the "Holy One." God shares the divine holiness with the people of the covenant. In the New Testament, Paul calls "saints" those who are faithful to Jesus. Followers were typically referred to by this general term although at times the term seems more restricted to leaders who are models of Christian life and witness.

Saints were and are ordinary people, imperfect, doubt-filled, weak, lonely, and fearful. Yet they chose to remain uncompromisingly faithful witnesses to the good news of God's love. There are no boundaries or barriers to being included in the group. Saints come from all walks of life, every culture, young, old, rich, poor, all are illuminated by the mystery of God's loving presence in their lives.

Often times people clamor for a new saint. Or maybe an old one who's ready to become the patron of a new realm.

Meet the already sainted Isidore of Seville, last of the ancient Christian philosophers, probably the most learned man of his era and an immeasurably influential instigator of education in the Middle Ages. He was the author of the twenty-volume magnum opus Etymologiae, and an indefatigable compiler of the world's existing knowledge. It was a bulky tome, but jam-packed with useful data.

For his efforts, Saint Isidore has been placed on the short list of spiritual superstars being considered for the role of patron saint of the Internet. And why not? Pasta eaters have their own patron saint. So do tax collectors, beggars, seekers of lost causes, students and people with sore throats or troubled marriages. Maybe the time has come for a certified cyber-saint.

Support is growing for the idea, with Isidore an early favorite. Also in the running is San Pedro Regalado who was said to have appeared in two places simultaneously, at the monasteries of La Aguilera and El Abrojo, which lie 48 miles apart. In addition to this miracle, the priest was a renowned navigator -- so in terms of exploring the world of virtual reality, you'd have to say that San Pedro Regalado has been "all over the map."

But some folks are objecting to attaching a saint from the past to technology of the present. They suggest finding a modern figure. How about ... Saint Gates of Microsoft? Naaaah.

So, just who is a saint? Today's passage from Mark drops a few hints. Someone asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment, and he responds by citing the Shema -- "Hear, O Israel ... you shall love the Lord your God" -- and adding "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:29-31). When the questioner affirms Jesus' response, Jesus says, "You are not far from the kingdom."(v.34) Even though this curious questioner is not a bona fide, official, one-of-the-twelve disciples, he is able to grasp and accept the truth of Jesus' teaching.

Sounds like God is on a saint search, looking for people headed for the kingdom. Qualifications seem to be acknowledging that God is the one true God, and then showing love that flows in two directions, to God and to our neighbor. A saint is simply a person who lives out an intense

devotion to both God and neighbor.

But can we spot them? Not necessarily, at least not at first glance. Back in the 1920s, a divorced woman worked for a series of leftist periodicals and lived a bohemian life in New York's Greenwich Village. In 1927, she became a Catholic, and then led a quiet rebellion within the church to reach out to the poor, the needy and the desperate. She was a pacifist, an anarchist and a crusader for social justice -- not your standard-issue saint!

And yet, her name is being processed these days in the great saint-making machine, even though she said before her death in 1980 that she wasn't interested. No joke. This woman, Dorothy Day, lived one of the most highly-regarded lives in the modern church, but said she never wanted to become a saint because she didn't "want to be dismissed that easily." During the depression, Day set up a network of soup kitchens where people could come to eat and sleep, and her Catholic Worker movement -- as well as her following -- soon spread nationwide. But Day resisted accolades and attempts to portray her work as anything but ordinary. She saw herself as a simple woman seeking to live in the gospel -- a person who demonstrated nothing more than an intense devotion to both God and neighbor.

God went deep into the most desperate parts of a sin-sick city and came up with Dorothy Day, a woman that the archbishop of New York recently called "a model for all in the third millennium."

(2) During the course of earning her master's degree, a woman found it necessary to commute several times a week from Victory [Vermont] to the state university in Burlington, a good hundred miles away. Coming home late at night, she would see an old man sitting by the side of her road. He was always there, in subzero temperatures, in stormy weather, no matter how late she returned. He made no acknowledgment of her passing. The snow settled on his cap and shoulders as if he were merely another gnarled old tree.

She often wondered what brought him to that same spot every evening -- what stubborn habit, private grief or mental disorder. I wonder if she didn't sometimes begin to doubt her senses, or believe in ghosts.

Finally, she asked a neighbor of hers, "Have you ever seen an old man who sits by the road late at night?"

"Oh, yes," said her neighbor, "many times."

"Is he ... a little touched upstairs? Does he ever go home?"

"He's no more touched than you or me," her neighbor laughed. "And he goes home right after you do. You see, he doesn't like the idea of you driving by yourself out late all alone on these back roads, so every night he walks out to wait for you. When he sees your taillights disappear around the bend, and he knows you're okay, he goes home to bed."--Garret Keizer, "Watchers in the Night," *Christian Century*, April 5, 2000, 381.

(3) Every Sunday for nearly three years Walter had a routine. Just before 10:00 a.m. he would open the doors to Epworth and prepare the church for worship. If the weather was cold, he would build a fire in the old wood stove. If it was hot, he would open all the windows and distribute the hand fans with a picture of Jesus on one side and an ad for a local funeral home on

the other.

Next, Walter would open the Bible located on top of the wooden pulpit and read the selected Scripture for that week. Then it would be time for prayer. Often there were folks in the community included on Walter's list. The latest national and world news would be mentioned. But always, Walter ended every prayer with a plea for God to remember and bless his beloved church.

Every Sunday, Walter had a routine, but what makes this story so unique is that with very few exceptions, Walter began and ended the Sunday morning worship service ... alone. Alone? Why? Many years ago, Epworth church was built on land donated by a neighboring farmer, but if for any reason they stopped meeting regularly, if Walter stopped opening the church doors every Sunday, the property would revert to the original owners ... Epworth church would cease to exist.

So what is the big deal? If Walter is the only one bothering to attend, let him go somewhere else or stay at home. Why not face the inevitable and allow Epworth to quietly disappear? What harm would it do? For Walter, it was a big deal. God had a divine purpose for his life and for the church he loved. But for now, Walter must be patient, be faithful ... and wait. Wait for what? ...

One Sunday morning a young family, new to the area, visited Epworth and after meeting Walter joined him in worship. They found something unique about this little church nestled among the trees and the old man who faithfully opened her doors. On the following Sunday they came back and within a few weeks the children were bringing friends. At year's end a minister was hired.

Today, Epworth is a small family church situated between several farms and hidden among the trees. Every summer they offer vacation Bible school for the neighborhood and each Christmas is celebrated with a pageant performed by the children. Many of the original family have died and some of the children have moved away, but the miracle of Epworth has never been forgotten.

On the first Sunday of August, people come from across the United States to visit the church of their youth and relive the miracle of the old man who refused to let his beloved church die. The worship service is followed by a picnic on the church grounds. While the children are playing and the adults are eating, you may notice a family wandering over to the nearby cemetery. If you listen carefully, you'll hear a parent telling her child, "Let me tell you a story about Walter...."

So, I hear you saying to me: "But wait a second ... not everyone's a saint." God is on a saint search, and it is not only perfect people who are going to be found. Sure, there may be some who are born with the natural ability to love the Lord with the totality of heart, soul, mind and strength, 24/7/365 -- but for most of us, this passion and power comes only after we discover that God has always loved us, and that his love precedes our own.

Fact is, most of us find the God only after we have been found by God. And all that is asked is that we respond with that same level of passion ... loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ... and showing a willingness to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If we do, we'll be God's holy ones, saints, set apart for God's service.