

In east Tennessee, where I was born and raised in the 50's and 60's, we referred to someone who was married to a two-timing, drinkin', poker-playin', lying, no good son-of-a-gun as a "saint". "She – or he – is a real saint", we would say, even if they were a co-dependent, enabling, spineless dishrag. Then the next comment would most likely be: "Poor thing, bless her – or *his* – heart."

Likewise, the same might be said of the spouse who is saddled with most of the cookin' and cleanin' and candle stick makin' – while the other is absorbed in the outside world, either with work or play or an over-healthy dose of both. "He – or she – is a saint, an absolute saint," followed by, you know it, "Bless her little heart." "Bless-her-heart" – it rolls off the tongue just as slick and smooth as the compliment that it isn't.

Now lest you think me jaded, most of us southerners also had grandmothers who were A-number-one, certifiable saints. Why? Because they loved us grand-kids - no matter what we did, who we did it with, how long we did it, or how many weeks went by before we stopped our lives a minute and checked in on them. My dear Mamaw, was a saint, and she blessed *my heart* as long as she was able to draw in a breath. And I would fight you any ol' day if you said otherwise.

All that being said - I am convinced that this colloquial use of the word "saint" was not exactly what St. Paul had in mind when writing to the Christians of Corinth. Interestingly, this word "saint" - literally "holy" (as in "holy ones") is used 229 times in the New Testament, the Scriptures that are the foundation of our beliefs. And I will contend, to the very end of this sermon, that those "called to be saints" in Corinth were so-called, not because of their efforts, or their morals, not even because of their good intentions as people of faith. They were called to be saints, holy people, simply and without question, because of the One ("capital O") who was doing the calling.

The story of our faith begins and ends with God, not the believers in Corinth or anyplace else that Apostle Paul and the first evangelists preached. But first, let me tell you a little bit about the city of Corinth. One of the largest and most influential cities in ancient Greece, Corinth, a lively, prosperous port city, was burned totally to the ground by the Roman army in 146 BC. History recounts that the Roman soldiers murdered the men of the city and sold the women and children into slavery throughout the Empire, never to be reunited with their Corinthian neighbors and friends.

So Corinth lay in rubble and ruins for almost 100 years - a century - until the Romans built a new city of Corinth in about 44 BC. New Corinth became the capital of the Roman province, and was repopulated with folks from every corner of the Empire: Jews and Greeks and Romans, retired soldiers, fortune seekers, craftspeople, politicians, the educated, the uneducated, rich and poor – all trying to live together without the benefit of a shared history – or tradition. This was truly a multi-cultural city, with all the challenges and joys that diversity brings.

A hundred years later, that is, after the reconstitution of the city, the Christian gospel was preached by Paul and his missionary colleagues to the patchwork quilt – might even say "crazy quilt" (if you know what that is) which was New Corinth. Amazingly, the Gospel was embraced across the ethnic, cultural and religious divides. So then, the Apostle Paul now encounters a church that is really a loose affiliation of believers, following a host of leaders, each vying for popularity and power.

Evidence exists that these converts met together informally to share visions and revelations and prayers and the occasional covered-dish dinner. But the church in Corinth had no real structure or formal organization. In AD 51 when Paul sent this letter, factions were rife and arguments were the norm, as would be expected in a diverse city such as Corinth.

Now the good news: The church in Corinth was intensely alive. The Spirit was flourishing. Miracles and wonders were being witnessed. Enthusiasm was in abundance. They were living in the present, to be sure, and they were trying to find their way amid the complexity of cultural and religious traditions and ethnic pride and political realities. And by golly, (here's the bad news) it was an unstable, chaotic situation among the believers that Paul encountered. How, he thought, how would he help his brothers and his sisters find their compass, their center, their focus. How could he affirm their faith while challenging them to faithfulness. How could he encourage them to appreciate the past and consider the future, as well as live in the present? How could he help them find themselves as a community, not just a loose affiliation of spiritual enthusiasts.

Which brings us back to the subject of sainthood. For you see, just as Paul claimed his identity as an apostle, a word meaning simply, "one who is sent", one who is *called* to be sent on a mission, he in turn addressed the Corinthian Christians as those *called* to be holy, together with all those who in every place who claim Jesus as their Lord. In other words, these believers were called to be saints, not of their own doing or choice or intention or even their own goodness, but simply and completely by the grace and love of God. Sainthood was not about the moral condition of the believers; it was solely about their acceptance of God's gift, God's amazing grace, to them and all of humankind.

Therein would lie the secret, if there ever was one, of offering a trustworthy identity to this crazy bunch of Corinthian believers, who were from all walks of life with all sorts of backgrounds and politics and beliefs and traditions and educational levels and sophistication or lack thereof, those with differing moral understandings and leadership preferences and even dietary practices. Their very context, the city of Corinth, was one of complexity and diversity as well as prejudices and resentments. Would they, along with their richness in knowledge and experience *also* become rich in faith, in hope, in love? For Paul, their very future as the people of God in Christ lay in the answer to this question.

Paul's notion of sainthood was rooted in his Jewish upbringing, where holiness was all about **dedication** to God. For Paul, this dedication was not a legalistic obligation but a wholehearted, grateful acceptance of God's grace, God's love, God's claim upon the life of the "saint". Witness the Old Testament words of Leviticus 19.2 in the Jewish Scriptures, which were in fact the first scriptures of the Corinthian Christians, the Lord said, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Meaning ... as saints we reflect the love and grace of our Creator, the One who claims us, the Holy Claimant of our lives.

You may call me a naïve preacher, but from the bottom of my heart I believe we find a lot of our satisfaction in life from our sense of purpose, direction, meaning, vocation, calling. And yes, our status as saints because we are claimed by God to reflect God in this world. As an example, we would be remiss not to honor the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., a saint by virtue of his embrace of the claim of God upon his life. While it was a life cut short because of his dedication, he was a faithful saint nonetheless, who made a difference in this world. A difference rooted in faith, in hope, in love. He was one of God's saints, not because he performed any certifiable miracles ... unless you count the miracle of changed lives as a result of his ministry.

We too are invited to accept our sainthood, as beloved people of God and recipients of God's amazing grace. God is faithful, all the time: This is the blessed hope in which we stand. Just as Paul's question for the first century Corinthian Christians was critical, so it is for us in the 21st century – that being: Will we, along with our richness in knowledge and experience, will we in all our glorious and fractured diversity, also become rich in faith, in hope, in love? May this be our way into the future as the people of God.

For this is the word of God, for the people of God. So be it. Amen.