

## Uncanonized, but Saints Anyway

I would like to concentrate on a single word this morning, but I need to remind you first that words are not static, not frozen forever into a single shape. They melt and shift and change, all the time. They mean one thing today, something else tomorrow. I thought I might dramatize it by bringing from home just one volume of a 12 volume set called the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a volume I showed some of you one evening at “Cooks’ Night Out” when we talked about words. The set was already out of date the day it came off the press 90-some years ago, and it took one man an entire lifetime to prepare a supplement, which was also out of date by the time he had finished it. Words are incredibly fluid. They are also sometimes short-lived.

If you were to walk up here later and open this book to almost any page, you would discover it is a kind of morgue for dead words, hundreds and thousands of dead words, words that are not ever going to be resurrected but once had life and danced on the tongues of living people. And you would also find words that look quite familiar, and sound familiar, but once had totally different meanings from the ones they have today. So, any student of the language has to keep buying new dictionaries because the words won’t stay still. My first college dictionary is hopelessly out of date, and if I have slept beside it, linguistically, for 20 years like Rip Van Winkle, so am I. And if the church goes to sleep, then it gets stuck with Bible translations that are out of date, and with language in its **worship** life that has no correlation with the language of its **common** life. So let’s talk about one word the church has had — still has — trouble with.

If I say it, the word *saint*, and let it hang in the room for a moment while you think about it, it's like you'd begin to define it by recalling people who became famous and were canonized, people for whom churches are named, like St. Paul or St. Francis or St. Thomas — towering figures, heroic, martyred, so far out of the ordinary that it's hard to think of them as real people at all, so that it would simply never occur to you to think of *yourself* as a saint, and if someone in a moment of deep gratitude were to call you one, you'd be embarrassed. After all, one of the ways in which we profess humility is by saying, "Well, I'm not a saint, but I try to do the best I can." All of which means that we have completely lost the original sense of that word as it was used in the early Christian church and in the writings we call the *New Testament*.

Where, by the way, it was used constantly. Letters from Paul start out like this: "To all God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints" — "To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints" — "To all the saints....who are at Philippi." Paul had no such people in mind as Mother Teresa or Francis of Assisi, hadn't the faintest notion of people so spiritually superior to most of us that Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches would one day beatify them, canonize them, dedicate churches to them, and say public prayers in their honor. When Paul used the word he was talking about anyone — everyone — who had by choice become part of the Christian community. The word had absolutely nothing to do with being more holy and exalted than all other Christians. It was simply a descriptive term for anybody who had joined the church. It defined a calling, a profession. If you want a modern example, people today who study certain books and pass the bar and

enter practice are called *lawyers*. Some of them are capable, some are inept. Some are noble, some are sleazy, most are somewhere in-between, but they are all lawyers.

So, in the first meaning of our word, the ancient Biblical sense, the one we have totally lost, **everyone** who professes faith in the life and teaching of Christ is a saint. Some are sorry saints, some are feeble, far from holy, but they are all saints because they all responded to an invitation to move towards a better kind of life — far from graduation, but at least enrolled.....far from perfect, but at least trying. In the New Testament sense, saints are sinners who have admitted it and come in from the cold for help. hymnbook!!!!

This is why the New English Bible, trying to avoid a word which is now badly warped and misused, has translated Paul's language like this: "Called to be one of his **dedicated people**." Not "called to be **saints**" but "called to one of his **dedicated people**." Given what we have done to the word *saint*, that's a good translation. You aren't embarrassed if someone calls you *dedicated*. That doesn't imply more holiness than you can imagine for yourselves. It simply means what *saint* once meant, that you are set apart for some special use, devoted to a different life from the one you might live without help, and in that sense I can say on any Sunday morning that every last and half-lost one of us is a saint because we decided to become part of a community of on-again, off-again, sometimes devout, sometimes selfish people known as the church.

We do not resemble at all what the world normally thinks when it hears that word. We are more like the people Paul called saints at Corinth despite the fact that they had all the messy problems of any other people

who are actually alive and being pushed and shoved by hormones and hungers, bad memories and mixed-up ambitions. In case you haven't read about them lately, some of the "saints" at Corinth were arrogant and quarrelsome, splitting the church because of rivalries and jealousies. Some of them fought one another in courts of law. Some of them flaunted sexual behavior which Paul thought would ruin them. Some of them visited the great temple of Aphrodite and paid for the favor of prostitutes. Some of them even turned the Lord's Supper on occasion into a gluttonous and drunken feast. Paul addressed them, in Goodspeed's translation, as "God's people," but they were about as mixed a bag as my friends and relatives.....and yours.

And yet Paul insists on calling them *saints*, so what he obviously meant is that a saint is nothing more than a sinner who has decided to improve herself under the influence of Christ and the church — set apart, having a vocation, but quite ordinary in all sorts of ways, including occasional slips and stumbles — in this first sense of the word a person like any of us in his room who have said, "I bring my weakness to this place in hope of finding strength. I bring my despair, in hope of finding confidence. I bring my chaotic and disorderly life in hope of finding peace and purpose." No better than some **outside** the church, except that we measure ourselves against a higher standard, judge ourselves by a more perfect Life, and are kept — or ought to be kept — humble by thoughts of how much we miss what we aim at.

So that's what it meant once upon a time to be a *saint*, but one of those called-out people would do a little better than another, and because we dearly love to find heroes we elevated that person above the others.

“Now there’s a *real* saint,” somebody would say, and so we began to create the second meaning of the word, and the descriptive term became a title. Not Paul, one of the saints (lower-case “s”) but Saint Paul. Not Thomas, one of the saints, but Saint Thomas. Not Joan, a peasant girl with a passion for freedom under God, but Saint Joan. And over the centuries we magnified the virtues of such people, and forgot their faults, until they became superstars not to be mentioned in the same breath with the likes of us — thought capable, in their spiritual stardom, of doing miracles and talking with God in ways denied to the rest of us. I’m not very comfortable with that meaning. I have some problems capitalizing the word *saint*, and I think it has distorted reality and Scripture in certain ways, but I can’t change history so I try to adjust to this changed meaning while wishing the earlier meaning could be resurrected.

There is, by the way, a third meaning. As happens so often, a sacred word becomes secular, and so today we use the word *saint* to describe people who manage to be unselfish without regard to church affiliation at all — people whose inspiration may have come originally from Scripture or the church, but who may or may not be part of organized religion. Not like Father Damien among the lepers, or Kagawa among the beggars of Japan, or Schweitzer in Africa, or Mother Teresa in India, but **secular** saints whose motivation cannot be so clearly identified with religion and church life. Lest any of us should suppose goodness to be a monopoly of the church, let me introduce you to some of these saints:

Take a woman named Helen, who can stand for all those families who have adopted foster children likely to die of AIDS. Helen is one of 18 such families in Connecticut, and the little girl she has adopted, Denise, has stick arms and legs and deep furrows between her ribs, because she is desperately ill. Two tubes run from her nostrils down the back of her neck to an oxygen tank. She wakes up 3 to 6 times a night, and most nights her foster mother Helen takes her into the bed she shares with her husband. "She's dwelling in love," Helen says. "She's not going anywhere as long as she feels the love." Helen has risked loving somebody else's child, knowing the child will die but believing it ought not to happen to a little girl without somebody around to give love and comfort. After a while, to alleviate her pain, the doctor prescribes morphine for Denise's, who is not quite two years old, so Helen rocks her even more often and whispers, "It's OK to go, these arms will hold you again," and soon after, at the hospital, with Helen and her husband and the drug-addict birth-mother all cradling one another and the child, Denise heeds Helen's sweet voice and dies. I have no idea whether Helen belongs to a church. All I know is that if she isn't in God's register of saints, I have no notion of what religion is all about.

And then there's a short little man named Michael Greenberg, 60, who for 24 years has been taking a bag of gloves in a green cotton bag down to the Bowery in Manhattan and giving them away. He looks for someone who won't make eye contact, old, reticent, disoriented. He dangles a pair of gray or maroon woolen gloves and says, "Take them, please, they're free. They're a gift, no strings attached." And then he shakes the

trembling hand and leaves. Why? Well, he says he learned it from his dad, who owned a Brooklyn bakery. His dad would stick in an extra coffee cake or sandwich for a poor customer, without their knowing. His dad used to say to his children, “Don’t deprive yourself of the joy of giving.”

But **they** were all poor, too, and one cold morning when Michael lost his gloves he never asked his dad to replace them because he felt so guilty about his carelessness. When his father died, 26 years ago, he started looking for a memorial and he decided he would put a pair of gloves on some poor man’s hands, just as his dad had slipped free Danish rolls into his customer’s sacks. When he started he was a sixth grade teacher — you know, one of those godless people a talk show host blames for demoralizing our kids in the public schools — but he saved from his modest salary to buy 72 pairs of gloves and gave them out, timidly at first, in the Bowery. Seventy-two because 18 is the Hebrew symbol for life, and 4 times life is 72. So we have a Jewish man named Greenberg, and if he doesn’t belong on the registry of the saints, religion is a farce.

And although that kind of goodness is usually not rewarded, once in a while there is a star of hope. Michael Greenberg was waiting for a train recently at Penn Station when a well-dressed man asked if he were the “glove guy,” and then said: “You gave me a pair of gloves on the Bowery five years ago, and now I’m married with a couple of kids, and I’d like to give you \$20 to buy more gloves.” Michael told him what he tells anyone else who wants to write a check: “No, thank you. **You** spend the money on gloves, and **you** give them out.” He knows that long-distance charity is not the same as touching someone’s hand.

But he's not a silly saint. He is practical enough to steer clear of really dangerous people on the street, who he says have gloves anyway, and hunts the little old men and women who are frightened of people. Do even **they** sometimes trade them quickly for a pint of cheap wine? It happens at times, but Michael says, "It doesn't make any difference. When you give a gift, you let it go." Somebody once described a saint as one who makes it easier for someone else to believe in God. Michael Greenberg makes it easier for me to believe in God.

By one of those strange, wonderful coincidence, weeks after I had planned this sermon, *Time* magazine came out with a lead story entitled, "For Goodness' Sake" — all about the saints, secular and otherwise, who are trying to make a difference at the end of a decade when, to quote the essay, "the rich got greedier, the poor got needier, and everyone else tended to his own shiny self-interest." But not the people in my next list:

A grandmother in San Francisco, with help she has recruited, provides over 1,000 meals a day to help men and women with AIDS. A man in Los Angeles figures out a new way for food banks to get their donations delivered, and saves them \$55,000 in fees. Another man establishes Covenant House for kids in trouble. A woman in New York City, who is an architectural historian, invents the Street Sheet, which is simply a map that directs homeless people to the nearest soup kitchen or clothes bank. She gets DuPont to donate waterproof, tear-resistant paper for her maps, and she designs them with easy-to-follow graphics so that the disoriented and the illiterate can use them. A Miami doctor now has 130 volunteer doctors and medical personnel working on



40 patients a day who come from under bridges and highways in south Florida. He has people so eager to help that in the med school where he is a Fellow, there is a 3-month waiting list among medical students for a course called the “homeless elective.” If I were any of the saints in this list, I’d be happy to remember the words of Jesus — that it is not the talkers who please God, but those who do something. Or, as the Quakers like to say: “When the *worship* is over, the *service* begins.” Thank God for the many in this church who know that!