

WGUMC November 2, 2014 "Saint Who?"  
Revelation 7:9-17

Pope Francis has been busy beatifying and canonizing former popes lately. One might ask, how long does it take to canonize a saint? In the Roman Catholic Church, that process can take a long time, a hundred years or more. But in San Francisco, we know it only takes 21 innings. Just in time for All Saints' Day, the city named for Saint Francis came out on Friday to cheer their new saint: Saint Madison, to be joined by Saint Hunter, Saint Pablo, Saint Buster...

This all makes perfect sense to Catholics, who have long been in the saint-making business, but Protestants are a little behind the curve ball on this one. A lot of us don't even know what a saint is. And it's all too easy to get distracted by what a saint isn't. For one thing, a saint isn't a personal assistant that you pray to in order to get through the day. If I told you there were a patron saint of parking spaces, you all might convert to Catholicism. Sorry to say that saints don't really work that way.

The truth is that a saint is not some kind of wizard or magician, though there are some pretty good stories out there. You may know St. Francis talked to animals. But did you know that his friend, St. Clare, could telecommute? Sick in bed on Christmas Eve, she still somehow managed to attend the Christmas liturgy at the monastery. She said that she heard the organ music and the monks chanting. She even somehow received holy communion. For that feat, she is now the patron saint of television.

But my favorite saint story is about Mary, the mother of Jesus. The house where she was born in Nazareth was a sacred site, and it came under threat of destruction during the Crusades. So in 1291, a host of angels swooped down, picked up the house and carried it through the air, first to a hilltop in what is now Croatia and then across the Adriatic Sea to the city of Loreto in Italy. Our Lady of Loreto was declared the

patron saint of pilots, air travellers and flight attendants by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.

I like the story of the flying house not only because it would make a great video game. I can also see the potential there for solving the affordable housing crisis here in Silicon Valley. Buy a house in the Midwest and fly it here. No security checks, no baggage fees, plenty of legroom.

Getting back to All Saints Sunday. If saints are not personal assistants and they are not wizards, what are they? In the early Church, the saints were martyrs, people who chose to die rather than renounce their faith. And because they were united with Christ in a death like his, they were surely united with him in a resurrection like his. [Rom 6:5]

So the first saints were martyrs. But very early on, people also began to honor those who didn't die the death of Christ, but in extraordinary ways did live the life of Christ. Of course, that meant that there were a lot more saints, and over time,

church leaders felt the need to institute a quality assurance program called canonization, for one reason, to make sure no one cheapened the title of "Saint." But don't let the emphasis on the big official saints make you forget all the little saints, the ones that the Bible talks about.

In the Bible, saints are not named; they are called. The Book of Romans is addressed to "all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." [Romans 1:7]

In Paul's mind, all believers and not just the cream of the crop are called to be holy. Every one of us has "gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." [Rom 12:6] And God gave these gifts to "equip the saints"—that's us—"for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come...to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." [Ephesians 4:12-13]

According to the Bible, we are growing in grace and we're on the stretch for sainthood. So, instead of asking, "Saint who?" I'm going to ask you to be Saint You.

We need you to, because Ruby Goodnight, one of our living saints, died on Tuesday morning, one week past her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now Ruby was one who spent her life building up the body of Christ. So most of us are very comfortable calling her a saint. But most of us are also convinced that we could never be like her, or Grace Praisewater, or Wayne and Elizabeth Williams.

That's where the grace of God comes in. It isn't hard at all to be a saint, really, because God does the work for us. Our own efforts have nothing to do with it. It is the work of God in us that makes us whole and holy.

In the Church, one way that Christians have allowed the grace of God to work in them is to renounce sex. Being a virgin enables men and women to give themselves fully and totally to

God without having to save a part of themselves for anyone else. If you're interested in doing that, the Catholic Church is interested in talking to you, because there is a real shortage of priests and nuns today.

But if you're not called to the celibate life, there are still lots of other ways to be a saint, to learn to live selflessly and to give yourself to God and to others. Be a parent, for one, or a teacher, a caregiver, a public servant, or a volunteer. St. Irenaeus once said that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. So, whatever it is that makes you come fully alive, whatever fills you with love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, just put your heart and soul into it, and God's glory will shine through you.

If you're like me, you do have moments when you feel fully alive to God. But there are lots of other times when you will have to keep checking your pulse. It's not that we lack passion. It's that we lack perseverance. We seem to be able to

be saints only every third Tuesday, certainly not every day.

And that's when it makes sense to pray, not *to* the saints, but *with* the saints.

The Apostles' Creed says that we believe in the communion of saints. While some of those saints are living right here with us, some are living with Christ in glory. And the Book of Revelation gives us a wonderful, inclusive picture of the saints in glory today. It is one of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne" of God. [Rev 7:9] And who are these multicultural saints? The ones who have persevered. They have come through the ordeal and they have been washed clean by the Lamb. [Rev 7:14]

Now if this vision of heaven seems too far out to you, think about all the ordeals you are going through. And then ask yourself, "Is it possible that praying *with* the ones who have

already made it could give me the courage to believe that I can make it, too?

On Friday, when I had hoped to be writing this sermon, I got a call from Stan Praisewater. He had gotten a call that morning from his mother in Washington, who had gotten a call from her close friend, Elizabeth Williams. Wayne wasn't doing well, and Elizabeth told Grace that she was worried that the end was near. I got out of my sweatpants and slippers and got into the car, all the while praying, "Not two in one week, Lord."

When I got to the Williams', Wayne was out of bed and slowly making his way into the den with a walker. He sat in the chair. We talked. I told him about the old copies of the *United Methodist Reporter* I had found with articles he had written. He told me about how he used to be on the national board of that venerable but now defunct newspaper.

Eventually, we got around to talking about his cancer. I reminded him that it was All Hallows Eve and that the next day



was All Saints Day. It was a perfect day to visit with two living saints. I thanked him for his perseverance and for the way he and Elizabeth have shown us all how to fight the good fight, run the race, and keep the faith. [2 Timothy 4:7] And then I prayed with these two saints, and I know that I came away the stronger for it.

No, I don't believe that saints are personal assistants or wizards that can make houses fly. But I do believe that saints are those who are fully alive to God and whether they are here or have gone on to a greater glory, we can live with them, work with them and pray with them, and by doing so, we can become more alive to God, too.

So when you say "Saint Who?" I say "Saint You!" And there's something I want you to know: every saint in the Catholic Church has a feast day, and today is yours. And with all the saints we say, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God  
forever and ever! Amen." [Rev 7:12]