

December 19, 2010/Fourth Sunday of Advent/David L. Edwards

Called to Be Saints: Considering Joseph

Romans 1:1-7

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.

Matthew 1:18-25

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...

Paul addresses his letter to "all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." He tells--in one very long sentence!--the whole story of God's loving action toward us and the world. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we have received the fullness of God's love. Yet, this gift seeks our response. So Paul speaks of apostleship, which means that we are to live as those who are sent by God in the spirit of Jesus to love and to serve. To me, that is the simplest way to put the life of faith: receiving and grounding our lives in the love of God, and living out of that love toward the world and its needs.

In our community, what we call the inward journey is the way we stay in touch with God's love for us, rooting our lives each day in God's grace (*karis* = gift). And the outward journey is our apostleship, giving our lives to the things to which we feel called in response to the needs of our faith community itself or the world around us. This includes discovering and using the gifts God gives us as channels of God's redemptive love.

So, we are called to be saints! How about that? You could say that is what we are working on and working with as we commit ourselves to an intentional spiritual life in the inward and outward dimensions. And yet, the word "saint" is problematic. It is not a word I have ever really warmed up to. And yet I have learned through the years that it has a different meaning in scripture than that the Church has given it. For centuries it has been misrepresented as some kind of lofty, even anti-worldly aspiration achieved by a few extraordinary people. Trying to be a "saint" can be an unhealthy effort to be seen as holy, or religious, or spiritual, or however you want to put it. There is nothing more tedious and wearisome, in my experience, than someone who is trying to be "saintly". The word "saint" is a problem when it is reserved for those who have achieved great things in the view of official religion, or who have gotten themselves killed for their faith, or the like. Sainthood has been made into Christianity's "hall of fame".

Paul would say, No, no, no! Sainthood is not something reserved for only a select group of spiritual superheroes, leaving the rest of us feeling like second rate Christians. Paul would not see being a saint as leaving our humanity behind. Paul's definition of saint is straightforward and simple: A saint is whoever loves God and seeks to be faithful in discipleship to Jesus, and the church is a community of such persons who support and encourage one another in that path. Paul addressed nearly all his letters, in one way or another, to the saints at such-and-such a place, or those who are called to be saints. Even the contentious bunch in Corinth he addressed as "those sanctified (made holy) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." And right there he went on to say that the Corinthian community was called to be saints together with everyone in every place who call on the name of Jesus, that is, who have committed themselves to discipleship (1 Cor. 1:2). The one exception that stands out for me is the Letter to the Galatians. Apparently that bunch had fallen apart so badly that Paul just could not bring himself to use the s-word!

Being a saint has to do with the journey we have chosen, to give ourselves to becoming more fully the persons God created us to be. To be a saint is to know you are loved by God, to stay in touch with that love daily at the center of your being, and to make that love the wellspring of your whole life. Saints are ordinary, garden variety human beings, who humbly go about taking their lives seriously and trying to live in ways that nurture what is good, compassionate, just, and life-giving in the world. I won't try to make Paul agree with me on this, but I say that you find saints inside and outside of the church, of religion, wherever people are living their lives as a journey toward the fullness of our humanity, the way God created us to be and to live. The word Paul uses (*hagios*) means one who is holy, sacred. I would say that a saint is anyone, Christian or not, who knows life, including their own lives, as sacred and lives that way.

Let's take Joseph as an example. As soon as we call him Saint Joseph, we elevate him above and beyond ourselves, into that spiritual hall of fame. When we do that, we lose our connection with him as an ordinary

human being who paid attention to the sacred dimension of his life. Joseph is engaged to Mary, a young girl, maybe thirteen to fifteen years old. The word translated “virgin” can equally be translated young girl. So let’s not get hung up on the virginity of Mary as though that is the most important issue! That is a big distraction from what the story is really about and what it means for us. It seems to me very strange how some churches and Christians make Mary’s virginity the big thing and completely neglect, even put themselves in opposition to, what Jesus taught and how he lived, the significance of his life for how we live.

So Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant. The child is not Joseph’s, and this puts him and Mary in a terrible spot. She is vulnerable to fierce social rejection, even stoning. Given all of this, Joseph’s response is surprising, even courageous. He decides to deal with the situation compassionately and quietly, to spare Mary, and perhaps himself, as much pain as possible. For all Joseph knew, his wife-to-be had been unfaithful. Yet whatever emotions—embarrassment, shame, anger, confusion--were stirring in Joseph, he acts as a person of compassion who wants to ease suffering. He is what Hebrew scriptures call an “upright man”. He is willing to sidestep, if not go against, cultural and religious norms in order to be a compassionate human being.

In the midst of all of this, Joseph has a dream in which God tells him to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. This child is part of what God is doing. God is present in this confusing, troubling, and difficult situation, doing something special for the world. Joseph wakes up from the dream and acts on what he has heard. He takes Mary as his wife and when the child is born, he names him Jesus, which literally means “God saves.” Joseph allows himself to become part of what God is doing. He doesn’t understand it. He may feel overwhelmed by the situation. But he has listened to that deeper voice and given himself to it.

If being a saint means living in and out of God’s love as the primary motivation of our lives, then Joseph does become for us a kind of model. God is always present and working within the fabric of human life to bring new life. God is within the circumstances of our lives, not outside of them. It is in the situations and circumstances we face that we can perceive something deeper at work, a deeper meaning and purpose to things. Joseph’s first response may be like ours when faced with difficult situations. We try to make the best of them, to be as compassionate and loving as we can, but we may see them as predicaments to be gotten through with as little damage or suffering as possible. This is the view that God has only to do with things that are good and pleasant, that have the feel of success or achievement. The rest of it we just need to survive the best we can.

The story points us to a deeper level of awareness. How is God present in this situation, this crisis, this difficult thing that I am facing? What might this situation be teaching me about myself, God, or life? What might this situation be calling forth from me as an opportunity for being an instrument, a channel of God’s love? Deeper awareness and perception calls for deeper listening. That is what Joseph’s dream is about. In scripture, God is always speaking to people in their dreams. Dreams have to do with our deeper consciousness, our deeper awareness. Maybe the story reminds us to pay more attention to our dreams. Or maybe dreams simply stand for that inner awareness of which we are all capable, listening to the inner voice of God, and learning to trust.

This is why silence and contemplation are so important for our inward journeys. When we cultivate our ability to quiet our minds and emotions, to become inwardly silent, we touch that ability to hear God’s voice, to listen for deeper meanings. We stop running from difficult situations and learn to listen for what God may be saying to us in them. Instead of just reacting to everything that is going on, being ruled by the emotions stirred up in us, we stop, quiet ourselves, and listen inwardly. Then we are able to respond to things not just in order to fix them or to get through them, but out of an emerging sense of what God is doing and how God is calling us to be part of it. We get beyond ourselves so that we can participate in God’s bringing of new life out of situations that seem to hold only threat.

This is why it is so important that we continue to grow as a community of prayer, committed to the inward journey. It is hard to learn and grow in this capacity for inner listening, for giving attention to God’s speaking to us at that deeper level of life. Our society, often even the church, works against it. We need to help each other. We need to practice together. In Covenant Members meetings. In mission group meetings. In our worship together. We encourage and remind each other to stop, quiet ourselves, and inwardly listen. This leads us to better and fuller insights, perceiving what God is doing and saying to us in each situation we face.

Joseph’s “sainthood”, to my mind, lies in the fact that he was an ordinary human being who was trying to do the right thing, trying to live his life with compassion. He took his life seriously as a human being created by God to show God’s compassion and justice. And yet Joseph’s sainthood went deeper, as he was open to the presence and leading of God’s spirit within the circumstances he and Mary faced. He had the spiritual courage to not only protect Mary from as much suffering as possible, but to go ahead and marry her! He was able to

become aware that all of this was part of something God was doing for the world, that his and Mary's small lives could be and indeed were interwoven with God's redeeming love for the whole world. So I think that being saints means taking our lives seriously as sacred gifts from God, paying attention to our lives and the events and circumstances we face, and embracing those experiences fully so that we can be fully part of what God is doing in and through them.

When Kaye and I were in southern India three years ago, we visited the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, India, a mission supported by our outreach giving. There we learned about Ida Scudder. She was a young American girl reluctantly visiting her father, John Scudder, at his missionary post in southern India in the late 1800s. She was asked one night to assist three poor women with their difficult childbirths. Custom prevented the husbands from letting a male doctor attend their wives. Ida had no training and could do little for the women. She was shocked to learn the next morning that all three women had died. Ida went back to the U.S., entered medical school and was one of the first women graduates of the Cornell Medical College. She returned to India in 1900 and opened a clinic with only one bed. Two years later she was able to expand to 40 beds. Today this is the 1,700 bed Christian Medical College and Hospital, completely run by Indians. I learned recently that the hospital is expanding into the countryside of the state of Tamil Nadu in order to serve more of India's poor. This is a different story from that of Joseph at Jesus' birth. And yet in some ways it is like Joseph's story. Ida Scudder embraced the difficult experience and came to perceive in it a calling for her life. She took one step at a time, while remaining open to what might continue to unfold for her life.

A favorite prayer of Ida Scudder's is inscribed in the garden at the Low Cost Effective Care Unit, the hospital's inner city clinic:

*Father, whose life is within me and whose love is ever about me,
grant that Thy life may be maintained in my life today and every day;
that with gladness of heart, without haste or confusion of thought
I may go about my daily tasks conscious of ability
to meet every rightful demand,
seeing the larger meaning of little things,
and finding beauty and love everywhere;
and, in the sense of Thy presence, may I walk through the hours
breathing the atmosphere of love
rather than anxious striving. [emphases are mine]*

God doesn't call all of us to found a hospital or college, or start some society-changing movement. But when we come to realize that, as this prayer says, "God's life is in us and God's love is ever about us", and when we embrace the events and circumstances of our lives, seeing in them "the larger meaning of little things," who knows what will happen? Who knows what God will be able to do in and through our lives? I think that's what the story of Joseph, of Mary, and of Jesus' birth is about.