

December 22, 2013 / 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." The word "saint" can be troublesome. I never really cared for the word, which always felt more oppressive than inspiring. Yet, I learned through the years that there is a difference between what scripture means by "saint" and how the church has used it. "Saint" has come to mean a lofty, even other-worldly, status achieved by a few exceptional people. Trying to be a saint can be an unhealthy endeavor 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. All in all, the church has turned "sainthood" into something like Christianity's hall of fame.

Paul would say, No, no, no! Sainthood is for everyone! Paul's definition of saint seems to be simple and straightforward: A saint is whoever loves God and seeks to be a faithful disciple of 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 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." One exception is the Letter to the Galatians. Apparently that bunch had fallen apart so badly that Paul could not bring himself to use the s-word!

Being a saint is about the journey we have chosen, the way of living to which we have committed ourselves. It is the way of 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 as channels of God's love and trying to live in ways that nurture what is good, compassionate, just, and life-giving in the world.

Thomas Merton wrote that it is likely the persons who consider themselves “bad” Christians who are actually the “best” ones (Seasons of Celebration, p. 95). I would go a bit further. Saints, in the sense I am talking about, are found inside and outside of the church, 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 saints are anyone, Christian or not, who know life, including their own lives, as sacred and strive to live accordingly.

Let's take Joseph as an example. He is an ordinary human being who paid attention to the sacred dimension of life. Joseph is betrothed to Mary, a young girl, maybe thirteen to fifteen years old. Let's not get hung up on the virginity of Mary as though that is the most important issue! It is important in the story only to indicate God's presence and activity, that there is more going on than just what's happening on the human, surface level! Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant. The child is not his, which puts him and Mary in a terrible spot. She is vulnerable to social and religious rejection, even death by stoning. Joseph's response is, to my mind, the heart of this story. He decides to deal compassionately with the situation. Betrothal back then was essentially the marriage commitment, so to “dismiss” her means divorce. Yet, Joseph wants to handle it “quietly” out of concern for Mary. Whatever emotions Joseph may have had about Mary's pregnancy—shame, anger, confusion -- he acts as a person of compassion who wants to diminish 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 do the right and compassionate thing.

In the midst of all of this, Joseph hesitates. While he ponders a course of action, he takes a nap! This point in the story is very important. It has to do with making space in our lives for insight, for deeper understanding and perception, for staying open to God. We rush to conclusions and decisions so much of the time, without a “sacred hesitation” or pause. Joseph sleeps and has a dream in which God tells him not to be afraid, and to go ahead and take Mary as his wife. The words “do not be afraid” are very important. It means, literally, “do not hold back out of fear.” Joseph wakes up and acts on what he has heard. He allows himself to become part of the bigger picture of what God is doing, even though he doesn't understand it, even though he may feel overwhelmed by the situation. The significant thing is that he has listened to and trusted that voice within him, that inner connection to God.

God is always present and working within the fabric of human life to bring new life, new possibilities. It is in the situations and circumstances we face each day that we can perceive

something deeper at work have 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, either dreams in their sleep or the waking dreams of vision and insight. Dreams have to do with 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 the inward journey of our lives, as well as for the outward journey. When we cultivate our ability to quiet our minds and emotions, to become inwardly silent, we touch that capacity to hear God's voice, to be sensitive to deeper meanings and insights. Instead of just reacting to everything that is going on, 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 perceive ways of participating in God's bringing of new life where there seemed to be hopeless or a dead-end.

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 keep learning and growing in this capacity for inner listening. So much in our society, often in the church or religion, works against it. We need to help and remind each other to practice this inner listening. In mission group meetings. In our worship together. In our own daily times of inward journey work. This leads us to better and fuller insights about what God wants to do through us and is saying to us in each situation we face. And it is the vital source of our ministries, our outward journey.

Joseph's "sainthood", to my mind, lies in his being 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, justice, and love. 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 become part of something God was doing for the 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 so that we can

be fully part of what God is doing in and through them. Even when we may have no idea what is going to happen or how!

When Kaye and I were in southern India six years ago, we visited the Christian Medical College and Hospital in Vellore, India. There we learned about Dr. Ida Scudder. As a young American girl, she had visited her father there at his missionary post 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 returned to the U.S., and became 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. 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, yet in important ways the same. 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. At the close of our worship today, we will pray together a favorite prayer of Ida Scudder's that is inscribed in the garden at the Low Cost Effective Care Unit, the hospital's clinic for the poor of the city. \*I have come to cherish this prayer. It expresses for me the kind of daily living that brings forth our "sainthood", the true humanity with which we were created.

We are not all called to found a hospital or college, or start some society-changing movement. But when we grow in awareness 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.

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*\*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. Amen.*