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Called to Be Saints
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1 Corinthians 1:2-3, 10-17

On Thursday night, children dressed up in different costumes—from super heroes to princesses and firefighters—came running up to our front door asking for candy and a word from the Lord. Okay, most didn't ask for the latter. It always brings back memories of when our boys were young. One of the questions around Halloween for kids is: "Who are you going to be?"

That is a question for more than trick or treaters. Who are you going to be? In good times and in bad, for those of us who are Christians, one thing doesn't change and that's who we are called to be. We're called to be saints. If we're struggling with a relationship or with a disease, if we're grieving or searching, if we're seeking to be the best spouse, sibling, parent, or friend we can be, whatever our situation or status, we're still called to be saints. This is what Paul tells the church in Corinth when he writes them in *1 Corinthians 1:2-3, 10-17* "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints**, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ....

"Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.** For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, **so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.**"

In the New Testament, "**saints**" translates the Greek term for "holy ones," and it simply refers to Christians in distinction from nonbelievers. This past week many Christian churches observed All Saints Day. It's a time to remember all the people who lived the faith before us, whether many centuries ago or those who told us the stories of Jesus and led us to faith. While we live in a society in love with the latest, the newest, the most contemporary, it's also important to recognize the valuable role that tradition and history play in our lives. Aldous Huxley, said, "That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all lessons from history."

The scriptures we read are close to 2,000 years old or older. Yet we believe God still uses them through the Holy Spirit to speak to us. In speaking to us, they enable us to join in a conversation that began long before we were born and shall by the grace of God, continue

long after we're dead. We do not walk the spiritual path alone, rather we follow the footprints and the shadows of the saints who walked before us and with us.

When we use the word "saint," many of us probably think of people like St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa or perhaps you think of the Roman Catholic Church. We often associate the word "saint" with the Hall of Famers of the faith who were almost otherworldly in their impact and holiness. However, we're all called to be saints, to be holy ones. This doesn't mean we're perfect, but we're striving each day to pick up our cross as Jesus said and to follow him by living as he lived and as he teaches his disciples to live every day.

When we think of people in the Bible, we often imagine them to be better than they were in life. The philosopher Schopenhauer once asked, "Is it necessary in order to honor the dead to deceive the living?" One thing that's fascinating about the scriptures is the way the Bible so honestly tells the story of the Saints, honestly admitting their shortcomings and the infidelities in their walk with God. Surely this biblical honesty is meant to give us courage and hope in our own day.¹

Of all the churches we read about in the New Testament, perhaps none presents a more vivid picture of the trials, mistakes and sins of a congregation than the church in Corinth. They had a lot of spiritually gifted people and were doing well financially. However, Paul's relationship with the church he'd established was disturbed from time to time by doubts, suspicions and the disobedience of people. Every church is composed of broken, sinful people united by their common need for transformation through Jesus' life, teaching, death on the cross, and resurrection. The New Testament spends a great deal of time calling people to be accountable for their behavior and to accept responsibility for their actions because until we can see and accept responsibility for our sin and failures, we won't truly see our need for Christ and we will not receive the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to change, grow and reflect the Spirit of Christ.

The failure to accept responsibility for one's own sin is the oldest sin in the world. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the snake. Lots of people are still blaming the snake, which means anyone or anything else other than looking in the mirror and acknowledging, "It's my fault, I made a mistake, I behaved wrongly, stupidly, selfishly, dishonestly, unethically, immorally." No one says that or does that. Instead we get either nothing or the weak, "If I offended anyone..." which isn't even an apology or an acceptance of wrongdoing.

Because of human sinfulness, the Apostle Paul writes the churches he planted frequently telling them to be united around Jesus, not around any human leader and warning against divisions and quarreling. Wherever human beings are in relationship, there's going to be conflict. It shouldn't surprise us that nations with significantly different cultures, histories, religions, languages, and values have difficulty resolving differences, when we know from our

¹ Lewis W. Spitz's "The Historian and the Ancient of Days," *God and Culture*, D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993, 149.

own experience how hard it is to overcome conflict within a marriage, between parents and children, or within a church where people share at least a core of common beliefs. We're at a critical point as a nation because of human sinfulness, partisanship, divisions, and quarrelling. We can look at Jesus' experience with the twelve men he trained in leadership to realize just how difficult it is to be united.

I was listening to someone talking about leading like Jesus. He said, Jesus invested most of his time in three people (Peter, James, and John) and nine others (the rest of the Twelve). Beyond those two inner circles were larger groups of 70 and 120 people. The speaker said pastors should follow the mentoring, discipling model of Jesus, because this is how he did it and look how well it worked. I thought to myself, "I fall far below Jesus in every category including leadership and look how he did. Of the three people he mentored in his inner circle, two lobbied for positions of glory and prominence and the third denied with cursing he even knew Jesus or was associated with his work. The other nine were jealous of the three, and one of them betrayed Jesus to the authorities. Secondly, if I try to follow this model do I think people will respond by saying, "Our pastor is being faithful to the leadership and discipleship pattern established by Jesus," or is it more likely that people will say, "The pastor is playing favorites, he doesn't care about me and my needs." Leading like Jesus may not be as simple as it sounds at first.

After Jesus, two of the greatest saints of the early church were Paul and Barnabas. Their influence and importance to the growth of the church can hardly be overstated. Barnabas was Paul's mentor and together they worked side by side and God blessed their work. Yet even these two incredible saints had a disagreement (*Acts 15:39*) that "became so sharp that they parted company." When we hear about Jesus and the Twelve, and Paul and Barnabas, we shouldn't be surprised to find disagreements or conflict in the church. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them." It's also true wherever two or three are gathered there are often three or four opinions. A man named Emo Philips used to tell this story:

I had a conversation with a person I recently met. I asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" My new acquaintance replied, "Protestant." I said, "Me too! What franchise?" He answered, "Baptist." "Me too!" I said, "Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" "Northern Baptist," he replied. "Me too!" I shouted. We continued to go back and forth. Finally, I asked, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?" He replied, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912." I replied, "Die, heretic!"

In today's scripture from *1 Corinthians 1:10-17*, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth urging them to be the saints they're called to be. The saints in the church were dividing themselves into factions, some supporting one leader, others associating with another. Paul describes this situation as ludicrous. He asks in a negative, rhetorical way, "Has Christ been divided? Was

Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" The obvious answer is, "No." The church is saved and sustained only in the name of Jesus. The people of the New Testament were no different in their struggles than we are. Yet in the midst of our personal challenges and the call to be a faithful spiritual community, God calls us to live as saints who are focused on Jesus and the cross.

Living as saints isn't easy. It takes courage to try and be a saint. In the novel *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene, the main character is a seedy, alcoholic Catholic priest who after months as a fugitive is finally caught by the revolutionary Mexican government and condemned to be shot. On the evening before his execution, he sits in his cell with a flask of brandy to keep his courage up and thinks back over what seems to him the dingy failure of his life. Greene writes, "Tears poured down his face. He was not at the moment afraid of damnation—even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at that moment it would have **been quite easy to be a saint**. It would only have needed **a little self-restraint, and a little courage**. He felt like someone who had missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. **He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint.**"

We don't want to wait until we are moments from death to see the value of God's invitation to be saints. To be saints begins with a faith founded on and supported by Jesus and the cross and what it represents. Our national anthem was written during the war of 1812 between the US and Great Britain. The flag that flew over Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor when Francis Scott Key wrote the *Star-Spangled Banner* in 1814 is at the Smithsonian Museum of American History in Washington D.C. The original flag measured 42 feet by 30 feet. It was the immense size of the flag that allowed Key to see it from his position out on the water following a night of cannon and gunfire. The means by which a flag that large could fly on a pole 189 feet in the air is on display at Fort McHenry on Baltimore's inner harbor. There in one of the barracks are two oak timbers, 8 foot by 8 foot, joined as a cross. National Park Service personnel discovered this cross-shaped support near the entrance to Fort McHenry in 1958 buried 9 feet in the ground. Not only did the cross-piece help rangers locate the original site from which the star-spangled banner flew, it answered the mystery of how such a large flag could fly in stormy weather without snapping the pole. This unseen device provided a firm foundation for the symbol of our national unity in the midst of the fire of conflict.

The saints of the early church struggled to be saints, united around Christ and the cross. In the same way, Paul says, the cross of Christ provides the foundation by which our faith is rooted and supported, especially in stormy times. As we remember the saints who went before us, we can be inspired by their faithfulness, courage and compassion, and we can learn from their frailties, and continue to look to Jesus who is the head of the church which is his body and for which he gave himself.

Blessing: *Hebrews 12:1-3*, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Who or what do you think of when you hear the word “saints”?
2. Paul stresses the need for being “united in the same mind and the same purpose.” Why is this important for the church in Corinth and at BBC?
3. What is currently dividing the church in Corinth (see verses 11-15)? What issues can be divisive in churches today?
4. How does Paul suggest the church transcend its divisions, disagreements and quarrels?
5. What facts about Jesus are essential for a church experiencing internal strife?
6. Who has been a “hero” of the faith for you? What from her or his life do you want to build into and reflect in your life?