

Ascending²: A Saint's Guide
21st Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Bixby
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[Luke 19:1-10](#) (NLT)
[Ephesians 1:11-23](#) (NLT)

The word Saint is thrown around a lot, and it can be confusing to track down exactly what someone means when they use it. Are they referring to specific, exemplary individuals, whose lives exhibited the love of God lived out in the world? Are they talking about people “on the inside track” vs “those other people, out there”? Or are they referring to everyone who repents, no matter their affiliation? Let's sort through the confusion, and hopefully come away with a better sense of saints.

First of all, linguistically speaking, *saint* is related to the Latin word *sanctus* – meaning holy. Both *sanctus* and *saint* are translations of the Koine Greek *hagios*, and all three mean “set apart for a sacred purpose.” When Paul – and followers of Paul – write about the saints in the New Testament, they are usually meaning people set apart from the world by their faith and belief in God and Jesus. Indeed, the letter to Ephesians refers to God claiming people by setting a seal on them, identifying them by the presence of the Holy Spirit filling their hearts. In this way, the Spirit claims us and causes us to know that we are a part of God's family.

What does this mean? It means that saints aren't just people of long ago, or people who lived amazing lives and accomplished things on a regional or global scale – no, it means that all of us are called to be saints. That's why Paul makes such a big deal of gratitude towards the early members of the churches in Ephesus and Collosae - thanking profusely the believers for all the reports of right living. He's grateful that people are not just believing in God, but following that belief with changed lives, acting in the same way that Jesus did. He's grateful that they are ascending to their call as saints.

No where is this ascent to sainthood more visible than in the story of Zacchaeus and Jesus. Zacchaeus, you may remember, wants to see Jesus when he hears that the wandering teacher will be coming to his town. However, Zacchaeus was worried that the crowds surrounding Jesus would prevent him from catching a glimpse, and so he ran out ahead, scrambling up the branches of a sycamore fig tree to be certain he could see Jesus above the crowd. You see – he literally ascended in order to see Jesus. As author Diana Butler Bass points out, he’s literally a social climber – and that was true for his profession, as well.¹ There were only a certain number of tax collector positions available from the Roman governor, and in order to get one, you had to bid on it. Whatever you bid, you owed to the Romans – and anything extra you collected, you got to keep for yourself, as the incentive to collect the tax in the first place. It’s literally a position of social climbing by cheating your neighbors.

When Jesus shows up, not only does climber Zacchaeus see him, but Jesus sees Zacchaeus, too. Though Zacchaeus has climbed high to try to see Jesus, Jesus calls him down from the heights of the tree, to sit at a table in equality. Zacchaeus goes from being set above people, from climbing trees and cheating them of their wealth, to being a saint at the table, giving back what he cheated others out of, and then three times over. And for a bit of irony often missed in the story, Zacchaeus’ name means “Pure.” As Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.”² Zachai – pure – lives up to his name by giving what he had to help others – and is able, then, to see God in Jesus Christ.

What do we saints learn of living into our call from this story? Well, firstly that ascending to sainthood does not mean literally or figuratively putting ourselves above others. Instead, it means to humble ourselves, to sit as equals at a table with people who may be great sinners, but who are loved by God nevertheless. It also means to do everything we can to help others, recognizing that ultimately

¹ From a talk on her book *Grateful*, presented October 2019 at College Hill Presbyterian Church in Tulsa, Okla.

² Matthew 5:8

everything we have comes from God, and everything we give also comes from God.

Perhaps you've heard the story of the boy who packed up a lunch, making sure to have two sandwiches, two twinkies, two bottles of juice, and so on. He walked over to the park, and sat on a bench near a woman taking a nap on the bench, who appeared to be sleeping rough. He starts to unpack his lunch, and notices the woman, and hands her one of the sandwiches, and they smile as they eat together. Through the rest of the meal, he proceeds to give a twinkie and a bottle of juice, until they smile at each other one last time, and he scoots off the bench, back home. When his mom asks what he was doing all day, he says, "I was having lunch with God – and she has the most beautiful smile!" Meanwhile, the woman meets up with a friend, and she gushes, "I just met God – and he's a lot younger than I'd thought he'd be."

You see, my friends, that being sealed with the Spirit means that you are to be identified with the love of God. And when we come to a table together, we share a meal with each other and with the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. We are all sinners – and we are all saints, too, for salvation has come to us. We, like Zacchaeus, are called to change. To help heal brokenness in the world. To sit at the table with Jesus and others – every time we come to the table. For this table is just a glimpse of the table to come, when people from all times and places sit together and share in the meal. And that means that the table is never empty – even when we cannot see, still, God is there. The saints of old, and the saints yet to be, they are there.

When I was a child, one of the bedtime prayers we said reminded me of this, too – and I'd like to share it with you:

*Stars that shine above
Tell of God's love –
For even when clouds hide,
Still, they are there.
So we, dear Father,
Though shadows hide Thee,
Know Thou art keeping watch
With tenderest care.*

*I am not afraid
When the shadows fall
And it grows too dark to see
For Thou, dear Lord,
Who watches over all,
Will care for my loved ones
And for me.*

In all the stars above, we have reminders of the near infinitude of creation, of all whose love we have shared, and all we will one day share. As we ascend to do Christ's work in the world – the work of the Second Power – we find a miracle taking place. The body of Christ, broken as it is, is reformed, remembered, reconnected through the lives of all the saints. The lives of you and me. The lives of everyone in the world.

Now, may God help you ascend to be a part of the body of Christ. May you love the world as Christ does, filled to overflowing with care for everyone you meet. And may you be a saint of the church, one whose legacy helps to unite what once was broken, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.