

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Saints, Ain’ts, and Ha’nts”**

Ephesians 1:11 – 23

November 2, 2014

All-Saints’ Sunday

Any of you happen to be major league baseball fans? If you are, then you know that slugger Mark McGwire once hit 70 homeruns for a team based in *Saint* Louis. Do you like high school soccer? If so, you might be aware that one of the top girl’s teams on Long Island is from *Saint* Anthony High School... while the *Saint* Mary’s boys’ team has yet to win a game. Do you follow NFL football? Well, then, you know about the New Orleans *Saints*.

Do you like James Bond movies? If so, then you probably know that before Roger Moore was 007 on the big screen, he was Simon Templar on television... in a series called The *Saint*. Did you ever visit Sylvia’s Grandma Emaria in La Habra, California? Probably not, but if you did, you saw icons and pictures of *Saints* Bernadette, and Jude, and Francis, and a couple of dozen others.

Saints! They’re everywhere! I’ll bet that we say the word “saint,” or see some reference to it every day... or at least every week. But, do we really know what it means? What do you think that *Saint* Paul had in mind, when he the words that came to us in our lesson from Ephesians this morning?

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus...”

“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints...”

“I pray also that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”

Just who was it that Paul was referring to, when he wrote of **“the saints?”** Who are these people? Where do they live? What do they look like? What do they do? For that matter, are even *people*... flesh and blood human beings... at all? That’s the question of the day, on this All Saints Sunday: what does it mean to **be** a saint? And what difference does it make to you and me, and to our day to day Christian lives?

Well, in my own reflections on this question, I’ve come up with what I think are two pretty common misunderstandings, two general mistakes that many of us make in our thinking about “the saints.” To help us understand the first mistake that we sometimes make, we need to go back to New Orleans, and that football team I mentioned earlier... the Saints. For those of you who may not remember (or who never cared in the first place!), back in the early 1980’s the New Orleans Saints were a spectacularly awful team. I mean, they lost often... and they lost ugly. They were absolutely as bad as a football team could be. And, after numerous years of nonstop ineptitude on the field, the fans in the stands understandably began to get a little fed up.

Now, I'm not sure exactly when it started... but, at some point, for a home game, a group of fans showed up with paper bags over their heads; with little eyeholes cut out so they could see. And their point was that they considered it to be an embarrassment to be seen at a Saints game. Well, the stunt turned out to be a huge hit, and before you knew it, thousands of fans were showing up at every Saints game with bags over their heads... sitting in blissful anonymity as their team got stomped.

And, along about this time, some sportswriter down in Louisiana stopped calling the team the "Saints," and started calling them the "Ain'ts," because they were so wretchedly awful. Like the paper bag routine, the name Ain'ts quickly caught on... and for several years, that's what everyone was calling the New Orleans football team! The Ain'ts!

Now, what's all this got to do with our topic for this morning? Well, sometimes, when we think of what it means to be a "saint," we subconsciously think of the "ain'ts," as in:

"It ain't me! Whatever else a saint might be, it sure can't refer to me... because, I'm just your basic, struggling, average Christian; trying to live a decent life, and sometimes not doing nearly as good a job of it as I know I ought to!"

In other words, a saint is somebody else; somebody better than me; somebody holier than me; some hero of the faith who's been canonized by our Roman Catholic friends. A saint is a writer of a biblical book; or the founder of a monastery; or the hallowed leader of some mystical religious order. A saint may be a lot of great Christian people, but it ain't just plain, workaday, three-steps-forward-two-steps-back-on-the-path-of-discipleship *me*. A saint is somebody else. And that's the first mistake we sometimes make in our thinking about the saints.

To understand the second mistake, we need to stay in the New Orleans area, way down on the bayou, and consider an entity called a "ha'nt." You ever heard of a ha'nt? You know what it is? A ha'nt is a ghost! The word "ha'nt" is actually a corruption of the word "haunt," and it refers to a "haunting spirit," kind of like a poltergeist. Ant that, in a way, is what sometimes comes to mind when we think of the word "saint."

And I don't mean that we think a saint is some kind of ghost... what I mean is that we sometimes think of saints as being somehow, "heavenly," or "angelic," or "not of this earth." Whatever else a saint may be, it's got to be somebody who is dead and gone... someone who probably lived a long time ago; definitely *not* someone with whom we can eat, or work, or shop, or play golf. We think of saints as detached, and disconnected, and distant; and not at all a part of our earthly day to day world. And that's our second mistake about the saints!

So, a saint ain't me; and, like a ha'nt, a saint isn't part of my workaday world. Two popular ideas about saints... but two ideas that are pretty much completely mistaken.

*"Okay," you say, "then what is a saint, if it's not an 'ain't' and it ain't a 'ha'nt?' If the popular understandings are wrong, what **does** it mean to be a saint? To whom does the term accurately apply? Where can we go to see a real, live, specimen?"*

Well, frankly, if you want to see an actual, living, breathing, saint... you don't have to travel to New Orleans, or Saint Louis, or Saint Peter's Basilica, or even Sylvia's grandma's house! All you have to do is turn to the right, or to the left, and look at your neighbor in the pew! Or, better yet, when you get home, take a look in the nearest mirror! And you will see a *real... live... saint!*

That's right, people! **We** are the saints! You and me and all the other brothers and sisters who make up the Christian community! And it was to people like **us** that Paul the Apostle was referring in our text from Ephesians. The Greek word that Paul uses, which the New International Version Bible translates as "saint," is *αγιος* (*agios*); and this word simply means "holy" or "set apart" for God's use. And that's what saints really are: people who've been set apart to live under the will, and the purpose, and the direction of God. In the Old Testament, this designation referred to the people of Israel. In the understanding of the New Testament, it refers to the Church. In both cases, it refers to people who stand in a covenant relationship with the Lord. And that, my friends, means us!

We are saints because of our relationship with Jesus Christ; or, as Paul puts it, because we are "in Christ Jesus." Christ is the ultimate Holy One of God, and because we are connected to Him through faith, we share in that holiness, and we participate in God's call to be a distinctive, consecrated, "set apart" people. And that means that "being saints" isn't something that we **do**... it's who and what we **are**, as God's called and chosen disciples.

Now, you may be saying, "*Well, that's all fine and good... but, what on earth does all this have to do with my daily life?*" That's a fair question. And I think that being aware of our "sainthood" is meaningful to our daily living in several ways. First, it ought to be a reminder to us that we all, in fact, share a very high calling in the sight of our Heavenly Father. So we shouldn't set low expectations for our performance as disciples, or make constant excuses for our faults, sins, and imperfections. Instead, we should set high expectations for ourselves, and accentuate the fact that we've been set apart by God to realize great things in His name, and for His kingdom. That doesn't mean that we won't ever royally goof things up, or fall short of living up to God's standards; but it does mean that God can and will still use us to His glory, even with all our flub-ups and mistakes.

Second, we need to remember that our identity as saints still stands, even on those days when we're not feeling particularly "saintly." Remember that our sainthood isn't something that we earn by virtue of our good behavior; it's something that God has freely given to us through the death and resurrection of His Son. So, if you're having a bad day, or even a bad year, remember that you don't cease to be God's precious child; you're still part of the plan, part of the covenant, part of the family.

And, incidentally, we're part of God's plan and God's family **not** just while in this life... but forever! That's one of the reasons why we observe something like All Saints Day; to remind us that we, here, in Southampton, New York in 2014, are connected to, and in fellowship with, all the Christians who've preceded us over the centuries... and all those who will follow us in the centuries to come. When God finally establishes His Kingdom in all its fullness, someday... we'll be joined in that Kingdom by Paul, and the Ephesian Christians, and the people who founded this church in 1640, and all of our dear departed brothers and sisters in the faith. And that's a wonderful comfort, and a glorious hope!

Finally, our identification as saints should guide and govern the way we treat each other. Throughout the New Testament, the word "saint" is particularly associated with the love and grace shown by Christians toward one another... demonstrated in practical service. So, really, to act in a "saintly" kind of way is simply to love one another; to support one another; to bear one another's burdens; to treat each other with respect. And it's also to remember that, when we look at each other, we don't just see "fellow church members..." we see family! We see "spiritual kin!"

To say that we are saints is just another way of saying that Almighty God has something special in mind for each and every one of us. God has set apart you and me... for some meaningful and blessed purpose.

And whatever it is that God is calling us to do and to be, we'll never have to put a bag over our heads in order to do it! May we go forth to live, and to serve, as the family of faith that we really are! That's our calling, as saints in the service of Christ!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!