

Faith Mennonite Church
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Becoming Saints *Psalm 24*

We all need saints in our lives. We need persons to inspire us, persons to call us to live up to our very best, persons to encourage us and to believe in us. When we are young our saints are those closest at hand...our parents, our grandparents, aunts and uncles, our teachers, a neighbor. As we grow older, we meet saints in stories, moving stories of powerful lives that continue to inspire and encourage us across hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. And we meet saints who may be rather ordinary people but who become larger than life in the face of illness or catastrophe that, in some cases, claim their very lives. This “cloud of witnesses” in the language of Hebrews 12:1, or what the Catholic tradition has called the “communion of saints,” exists beyond time and space. We find courage and inspiration in their stories; they uphold us in prayer.

Mennonites have always been hesitant to speak of saints, at least in ways that elevate certain folks above others in a kind of spiritual ranking. “We’re all saints,” my mother would say, “sinners saved by grace.” Certainly the notion of saints can be problematic if we somehow think that only a few folks are endowed with some sort of saintly gene. But the Bible tells another story. Each of us is part of the story of creation that God called “very good.” Each of us is made with the wonderful creative capacity to grow and change and over the course of our lifetime—regardless of the length—become saints.

I’d like to share a few thoughts on Psalm 24 this morning and then two stories of this “becoming” process.

Psalm 24 was one of the first passages of scripture that I memorized as a child, after Psalm 23 and the Lord’s Prayer. I learned it in the King James Version. This Psalm is firmly planted in my memory, because of its lyric quality and strong images, but it always seemed a bit mysterious, especially the final section with the gates, the everlasting doors, and a strong and mighty King of glory. As a peace-loving Mennonite, I wasn’t entirely comfortable with this “Lord mighty in battle.” However, as I have read commentaries on this psalm during the past couple weeks, I’ve come to a more satisfactory bridging of meaning and imagery.

Psalm 24 has three sections that speak of the past, the present, and the future. The first section recalls the past: God’s work in creation, establishing the earth and the sea. We are part of this wonder, and like all of creation we belong to God.

The second section speaks of how we live in this world, of how we become saints. The King James Version calls us to live with “clean hands and pure hearts,” to not “lift up our souls to vanity” nor to “swear deceitfully.” Clean hands and pure hearts are essentially right actions and thoughts, actions that match our words. Not lifting our souls to vanity nor swearing deceitfully means we remain steadfast to God, seeking God’s truth. These verses remind us of the prophetic call of Micah to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” (6:8) and of Jesus’ proclamation in the beatitudes, that the “pure in heart will see God” (5:8). The Psalmist, the prophet, and Jesus had the same expectation: that these actions are possible and life-giving for everyone. Being a saint is not exceptional. We are all called to this way of living that leads us toward God; and in that very act of seeking after God, we are blessed.

Finally, we come to the third section, a song of the future, when God is worshipped and acknowledged by all. The Psalm was written at a time of fortified cities, with gates that could be opened in welcome or closed for protection. This is a song of worship of the people of Israel who through much of their history were small, weak, and often under attack by their stronger, better armed neighbors. In the midst of that weakness they sang their hope and their trust in One who was greater than any earthly power that would try to overcome them. Part of this trusting is opening the gates, opening them wide.

For Christians living on this side of the resurrection, we interpret the King of glory to be none other than Jesus being received into the eternal kingdom. Having passed through death, as a human, he

does not enter his kingdom alone, but brings all of humanity with him. And here we have one of the mysteries of faith: part of becoming saints is opening ourselves to the work of Christ in our lives—opening the gates; but ultimately we become saints because of Christ’s work in our lives. We are at once on the side of the doors that are opening to the King of glory and on the other side, following and being shaped by Christ as we enter.

Along with this ancient poem of “becoming saints,” I have been moved by two recent stories of becoming. A week and a half ago, we commemorated the 10-year anniversary of the tragic death of Senator Wellstone, his wife Sheila, their daughter Marcia, and several campaign aides. Leading up to that anniversary some of you may have heard or read interviews that David Wellstone gave. He has just written a book, *Becoming Wellstone*, in which he chronicles the painful aftermath of his family’s accident, and his eventual movement from disorienting grief to purposeful living. David recounts the ways he was shaped by both of his parents, in life and in death, and how he has worked to carry on their legacy, particularly in the area of mental health care. “Becoming Wellstone,” has not meant becoming a prototype of his father—David is not seeking a political career—but working in his own way for the good that we associate with the Wellstone name.

During the same period of time, I turned on the TV one evening and caught the tail end of a Ted Talk, in which a young woman was explaining the things she is doing to prepare for the eventuality of developing Alzheimer’s disease. She watched her father die of this illness and what she learned during that painful process is helping her become a better person. She outlined three things she is doing: first, she is learning to do things with her hands so that when she can no longer read—something she enjoys doing now—she will still have things to occupy her time. Second, she is building core physical strength. One symptom of Alzheimer’s is the loss of balance and the propensity to fall. This will happen, she knows, as a natural progression of the disease, but if she is strong, it will happen less quickly. Third, and most important, she is becoming a nicer person. Her father was deeply loving, and even after he no longer recognized any of his caregivers, he expressed appreciation for their care. She wants to develop the kindness of her father. I was struck by the courage of this woman to prepare for a future that none of us would welcome. But becoming something for the future is enhancing her life now. So it is as we become saints.

A tragic accident, a tragic disease. In both cases those who suffered the excruciating loss of a loved one took courage from those they lost and now are working to become the best of those they lost. They are becoming saints.

In two days many people in our country will go to the polls to vote. There is every indication that this will be a close election—from the presidential race to the two proposed constitutional amendments on the Minnesota ballot. Many of us have actively worked against the amendment proposals, believing they are discriminatory, promoted to restrict and exclude rather than enlarge the benefits of our society and protect those at the margin. The vote-no campaigns have based their approach not on argumentation or facts, but rather story-telling—stories of how someone or some family will be hurt if these proposals pass.

There is no better way to prepare for this week than to share at the table of The Lord, a table that recalls Jesus’ death and a seemingly failed political struggle. But death did not have the final word; death could not put bounds on the love of God. The communion of saints who surround us as we gather lived through some of the darkest, brutal times in history as well as times of hope and expectation. Our hope is in the Christ who, through his death and resurrection, broke down the dividing wall between peoples. As we partake in this supper, let us open our hearts to the King of glory and to our foes whom God also calls in love.