

Saints in the Making
Luke 6:20-31
November 4, 2007

An oil well caught fire and the company called in the experts to put out the blaze. But so intense was the heat that the firefighters could not get within a thousand feet of the rig. In desperation the management called the local volunteer fire department to help in any way they could. Half an hour later a decrepit-looking fire truck rolled away from the devouring flames. The men jumped out of the truck, sprayed one another, then went on to put out the fire. The amateurs outdid the experts by daring to get so close to the fire.

In gratitude, the management held a ceremony at which the courage of the local firemen was commended, their dedication to duty extolled—and an enormous check was presented to the chief of the fire department. When asked by reporters what he planned to do with the check, the chief replied, “Well, the first thing I’m going to do is take that fire truck to a garage and have the brakes repaired!”ⁱ

Most of us are like those firefighters. We don’t relish the thought of being thrown into the midst of a situation calling for courageous action, no matter what the rewards and glory. Hero status is not something which we set out seeking in our lives, but sometimes heroism is thrust upon us by circumstances or coincidence, which Bernie Siegel defines as “God’s way of remaining anonymous.” Sometimes we are in the right place at the right time and the opportunity presents itself to do the right thing. It is not that we have planned to be there doing what we’re doing, but there we are and there God is, calling us to respond. It is through the ordinary circumstances and sometimes extraordinary experiences of life that God shapes and molds us into new people and sets us on the road to sainthood.

The title of saint is not something that can be earned or bought. There’s no bestseller entitled *How to Become a Saint*. There are not ten easy steps to holy living. There’s no magic potion to drink and inflate us into “Supersaints.” In fact, the very idea of striving to attain the status of sainthood is contrary to the holy life which is only given by the grace of God.

Sainthood is a gift of grace, the birthright of the baptized. When we pass through the waters of baptism we begin a lifelong journey into sainthood. We are not automatically or instantly transformed from sinners into saints. It happens as a gradual process which John Wesley called sanctification. We can’t simply receive the forgiving love of God and go on with business as usual. We must respond to this divine love by submitting ourselves to God’s sanctifying grace, whereby we grow into the likeness of Christ. Wesley calls this “going on to perfection,” being made whole and holy, being restored to the image of God in which we were created. The process of sanctification is

a joint venture between us and God. We cannot become saints by our own power. We offer ourselves, and it is God who molds and shapes us into saints.

The very experiences of life are the means whereby God fashions us into saints. I don't mean to imply that God causes us every event of life, but rather that God works within all circumstances that we might learn and grow from them. The process is not always an easy one; the pathway to holiness is often a painful one. It causes us to stretch, bend, and sometimes even break in order for the new being, the holy image of God to emerge. In recent weeks I've been reminded that spiritual growth is an often painful process and I recognize how far I have to grow. But I also trust that God is working through our human failures to teach and grow us.

The journey into sainthood leads us through many lands. That's how one Master explained to his disciples the stages he had passed through in his quest for the divine. "God first led me by the hand," he said, "into the Land of Action, and there I dwelt for several years. Then God returned and led me to the Land of Sorrows; there I lived until my heart was purged of every inordinate attachment. That is when I found myself in the Land of Love, whose burning flames consumed whatever was left in me of self. This brought me to the Land of Silence, where the mysteries of life and death were bared before my wondering eyes."

"Was that the final stage of your quest?" the disciples asked.

"No," the Master said. "One day God said, 'Today I shall take you to the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, to the heart of God himself.' And I was led to the Land of Laughter."ⁱⁱ

The journey of sainthood leads us through the lands of action, sorrow, love, silence, and laughter—not necessarily in that order, nor just once in a lifetime. These are the experiences of life through which we are shaped and made into saints.

Daj Hammerskjold said, "The road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." In the land of action we discover and use our gifts, talents, and skills in the service of God and neighbor. Wesley called this social holiness. The early Methodist movement addressed several areas of social concern, among them poverty, slavery, prisons, alcohol, war, and education. They followed the model of Jesus, who acted on behalf of the poor, the sick, the prisoner, the outcast. Today we are called to act with the Spirit of Christ, to see with the eyes of Christ, to speak with the voice of Christ, to heal with the hands of Christ. This week we have the wonderful opportunity of putting our faith into action as we host the Winter Nights shelter. We are called to be Christ to our guests. We are saints in the making when our actions reflect the compassionate ministry of Jesus.

The travels of life will undoubtedly lead us through the land of sorrow where we may be overcome with an avalanche of anguish or stumble into the depths of despair. There we will walk through the fiery furnace, but the promise of the Lord is that when we walk through fire we shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume us. God

will be with us, so that even in the face of danger and destruction, souls will be forged and faith formed. In the words of Paul, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint." The early Christian martyrs who are numbered among the communion of saints faced severe persecution, sometimes even death, and yet they held firm in the faith. In times of trial they did not deny their God. Their steadfast faith is the very shining quality that makes them saints. God offers us no guarantee or protection against the struggles of life, but God does equip us with courage, guidance, and strength to meet the challenges life presents. We are saints in the making when we navigate the stormy seas of suffering and sadness.

Saints must always pass through the land of love. Saints are those who have heard the message of God's love and respond by loving other human beings as God has loved them. The love modeled by Christ is a self-giving kind of love that freely gives without counting the cost. We are saints in the making when we obey Jesus' command to "love one another."

A soldier spoke to his commanding officer, "My friend isn't back from the battlefield, sir. Request permission to go out and get him."

"Permission denied," said the officer. "I don't want you to risk your life for a man who is probably dead."

The soldier went, all the same, and an hour later came back mortally wounded, carrying the body of his friend.

The officer was furious. "I told you he was dead. Now I've lost you both. Tell me, was it worth going out there to bring in a corpse?"

The dying man replied, "Oh, it was, sir. When I got to him he was still alive. He said to me, 'Jack, I was sure you'd come.'"

Saints spend a good deal of time risking their lives in the land of love.

The land of silence or solitude seems like a foreign country to most of us. Many of the saints we read about lived in monasteries or convents set apart from the hustle and bustle of life as we know it. They spend hours in quiet solitude praying to God and meditating on the scriptures. For most of us, moments of quiet solitude alone with God are rare indeed. We're lucky if we snatch a few peaceful moments in the car on the way to work or while waiting for children. But taking even a few minutes a day or an hour each weekend for reflection is renewing to the soul and essential to holy living.

Finally, the fullness of life is known when the saints go marching into the land of laughter, the land of joy. The final destination of the journey is the heart of God, wherein we find eternal bliss. It is not the fleeting happiness that graces our lives every now and then. It's the joy of loving and being loved by God. Frederick Buechner writes, "To be a saint is to live not with the hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to

work and weep for the broken and the suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews. Maybe more than anything else, to be a saint is to know joy. Not happiness that comes and goes with the moments that occasion it, but joy that is always there like an underground spring no matter how dark and terrible the night. To be a saint is to be a little out of one's mind, which is a very good thing to be a little out of from time to time. It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.ⁱⁱⁱ We are saints in the making when we learn to laugh and enjoy the presence of God.

God uses all the experiences of life to shape and mold us into holy beings, into the likeness of Christ. It is only by God's grace that we are restored to the image of God, that we are made holy and sacred, that we are saints in the making. God is preparing us for our reunion with the communion of saints who have gone before. Meanwhile we traverse the lands of action, sorrow, love, silence, and joy, as did they. May we be steadfast in faith, trusting in the grace of God that holds us and shapes us in love.

ⁱ Anthony de Mello, S.J., *Taking Flight* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 109.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 126.

Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 119-120.

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