

Becoming Saints

Judges 16: 15-17, 23-30 Luke 19: 1-10

This is All Saints Sunday. For Presbyterians, the term “saints” refers to those who seek to follow the model of Jesus. It’s entirely different from the Roman Catholic Church’s veneration of certain select individuals who are given the sacred title of “Saint.” According to Presbyterians, all of you are considered “the saints.”

This may seem rather curious since last week I led all of you to understand yourselves to be Pharisees, and now this week I’m saying that you’re all saints. Both can be true. Consider how many of our prominent biblical heroes were less than stellar figures before turning their lives around. Jacob was a real dirtbag. Moses was a murdering fugitive. David was a golden boy until he became an adulterer who contrived the death of his loyal warrior in order to steal his wife. Peter appears sniveling after Jesus’ arrest. The disciples are self-absorbed and clueless most of the time, yet they keep the movement going when Jesus is gone.

If you look at the record of many of those whom the Catholic church has designated as saints, you will find that many were scalawags for years before they got their lives together. Augustine’s portrayal of his early life in his book *Confessions* has always been a bit juicy. Francis of Assisi was born into a wealthy family and was the party animal of Assisi for many years before coming to an awareness of Jesus’ way of the Kingdom life. An article I read this week said that Sister Teresa of Calcutta could be a bitch and was hard to get along with. Those who were *always* saintly aren’t as numerous as you might think.

Let’s start with the story about Samson from Judges. If we didn’t know the story of Samson from Sunday School, then we may have seen an old B movie of some oiled up unknown body builder as the biblical hero. The story in Judges is actually much better than those movies.

If you read from the beginning of the Samson section, you hear about Samson’s mom, who is noted often here, but without *any* name. The mom made one of these deals with an angel in order to get pregnant. Samson’s father is Manoah, like he’s does much of anything.

Apparently angel deals were big back then, fulfilling the role held by fertility specialists today. Instead of “take these pills,” the angel would say, “let’s make a deal.” Here was the deal for Samson’s mom; she won’t eat or drink anything from the vineyard – no grape nothing – and won’t eat anything unclean. The boy is to be a Nazir, living under the Nazirite vow, and these are the conditions.

Like the instructions in the deal with his mom, Samson can’t drink anything fermented like wine, or eat anything ritually unclean, *or cut his hair*. The Nazirite vow continues to be practiced in some form through the time of the early church at least,

since Acts 21 describes the apostle Paul's involvement with those who are undertaking what seems to be a Nazirite vow.

We never get a physical description of Samson as some well-oiled, muscular guy; sorry B movie fans. What we usually hear when Samson shows great physical strength is the phrase, "The Spirit of the Lord came upon him." When you hear that, look out because Samson is about to blow your socks off.

We also hear that Samson didn't do well with women. He finds his first wife and she's a Philistine. He comes home to mom and dad and says, she's the right one for me. They probably said, "Oy-evay, what? You couldn't find a nice Jewish girl; you had to go fall for one of those uncircumcised Philistine girls." That marriage didn't go well; "who knew?"

At the start of chapter 16, we hear he's spent the night with a prostitute. Don't you love the Bible? The writers really let it all hang out. The prostitute, that didn't end well; "who knew?"

This brings us to our story of his relationship with Delilah. What could possibly go wrong? He's done so well with women so far. She may not be a Philistine, but she is in cahoots with the Philistines. Delilah agrees to betray Samson to the Philistines for a nice sum of money. "Who knew?" She simply needs to learn the source of his great strength and then hand him over.

Several times she's tried to trick him, only to be tricked herself by his false answers. Today's text says that Delilah's nagging brings Samson to actually disclose his truth. He finally admits that if his head was shaved or his hair cut, he would lose his strength. Obviously, Samson's strengths did not include intelligence or discernment since predictably Delilah quickly betrayed him, as women tended to do in Samson's life. Then Samson was subdued. Who saw that coming, right?

Now, was Samson's strength simply in his unshorn hair? Or would it be accurate to say that his strength lay in his being set apart for God under the vow of the Nazir? Betraying the source of his strength also compromised his Nazirite vow. The strength of God left him because **he abandoned** his faithful commitment to God. Rather than remaining faithful, he chose a path apart from God's way by pleasing **Delilah**, not God. The promise, and the strength within that promise departed, too. Like a sumo wrestler competing in a ping-pong match or former press secretary Sean Spicer on *Dancing with the Stars*, his best strength was gone, taken from him, and the promise in him was lost.

Yet see how Samson recovers his strength amid his weakness. Having had his eyes poked out by his captors, blinded, chained, he **prays** to God in his **weakness**, "O Sovereign Lord, remember me. O God, please strengthen me once more." In *that* weakness, Samson finds his greatest strength in **faithfulness** to God.

Samson is hardly saint-like for much of his story. It is at the end that we find Samson recognizing the true source of his fabled strength. It was not his hair but his

God and himself as a vessel of God's blessing. It had been a long time since he connected with his Nazirite vow, a distant memory most likely. But when all else had been stripped from him, his God and his faith remained, buried to be sure, but emergent in his most desperate time.

With Samson, we can read between the lines and perceive the cause-and-effect, but that isn't so easy in our story from Luke.

In Luke 19, we find Jesus journeying toward his destiny in the Holy City of Jerusalem. He is passing through Jericho, about 10 miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus is a celebrity of sorts at this point and word has gotten out that this mystery man is coming. They may not care whether he is a prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist. Some may want to see a Messiah, even though others have claimed this title of political liberator. Perhaps he truly is a miraculous healer, or a teacher of great spiritual wisdom and truth. Regardless, it isn't every day that a celebrity comes walking through town.

The story of Zacchaeus the tax collector describes what happens when faithfulness takes priority, and routine complacency simply has no place any longer. Let's remember that Zacchaeus is rich; he's the chief tax collector. But we're told that he's also a short fellow. Jesus draws such a crowd that short Zacchaeus can't see. Like the preceding parable of the blind beggar who cries out incessantly for Jesus – a totally different character from Zacchaeus the wealthy tax collector – here Zacchaeus is also determined to see Jesus and maybe get his attention.

His determination is pretty funny. Imagine that a celebrity comes to town and one of the town's wealthiest citizens runs down the road ahead of the celebrity and climbs a tree to see him. 'Look, Larry Roberts is running down Main Street and climbing a tree to see this celebrity!' Right. Normally, the wealthy, powerful and prominent are introduced to the celebrity in a very deliberate manner. Not here, and that format of the privileged getting special privilege won't work with Jesus. Then again, the wealthy and powerful tend to want nothing to do with Jesus anyway. Zacchaeus is clearly different. And he isn't going to let his small stature deter him. Jesus is here and Zacchaeus realizes that this is the time to act.

Not only does Zacchaeus climb a sycamore and gain Jesus' attention, Jesus stops and declares that he wants to stay in Zacchaeus's house. Notice how Zacchaeus has actually been called by Jesus, singled out for a privilege and blessing. Zacchaeus may have been flustered at first, but he must respond to this call.

Being tax collector for Romans, Zacchaeus is despised. People mutter about Jesus giving honor to a contemptible sinner, just as the earlier crowd by the blind beggar was dismayed by his noisy shouting. But while they're busy sneering, Zacchaeus responds to Jesus.

Apparently, Zacchaeus knows all about Jesus' teaching. Zacchaeus makes a stunning commitment showing how he, too, will follow Jesus. He pledges to act righteously and justly; to give half of his possessions to the poor, and to repay four times

the amount anyone had been cheated in their taxes. Believe me, most everyone got gouged on taxes. So, he has made some outrageous commitments!

Remember, Zacchaeus had wealth, power, and prominence. He could have been like rest of the wealthy and powerful, dismissing Jesus and going on with life unchanged. But instead, he has already responded to Jesus' teaching to seek life's fulfillment in faithfulness and obedience to God. He had apparently made this commitment before the encounter on the road through Jericho. By his faithful response, Zacchaeus, the sinful, hated tax collector, would actually gain the blessing of God's grace, peace, and new life, worth more than all his money could buy.

Zacchaeus responds enthusiastically and sacrificially *before* meeting Jesus. His response must be faithful, yielding his usual, self-serving practices. There's nothing faithful or obedient about saying, "Lord, Lord," and then doing business like Jesus never existed, or as if Jesus was inconsequential.

Zacchaeus found himself in the *presence* of the Lord and in the *promise* of the Lord. Zacchaeus found in him a new direction, a new spirit, a new life that brought him to an exceptional place. While Jesus had touched the life of one who was regarded as sinful and contemptible, Jesus also enlisted a new pilgrim, a new saint. He is a spiritual pilgrim since we don't hear that Zacchaeus followed Jesus toward Jerusalem like the blind man. Still, Zacchaeus traded his former strength in wealth and prominence in exchange for faith in the Lord and his Kingdom.

Both Samson and Zacchaeus show rather dramatically that the path of the saints is not a matter of being born holy, of uttering a profession of faith or participating in a ritual act without any change of life, or trusting in one's own understanding for strength and security, or believing that the faithful course would be smooth, even, and easy, not requiring significant dislocation and considerable sacrifice, and above all, coming to the realization that the world's values are corrupt and futile and need to be fully supplanted by the disorienting values of the Kingdom.

Yes, as I said last week, we can do a great impression of the self-righteous Pharisee; we need to recognize that. We also need to remember that we are also the saints, a sometimes lousy bunch of self-absorbed, sinfully complacent disciples who are trying to find their way through the maze which the world has provided in order to discern, discover, and commit to the path of the Lord and the way of new life in the Kingdom.