

“What Makes a Saint?”

Philippians 4:1-7

All Saints’ Sunday

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I wonder if any of you saw the news report—it was a number of years ago now—the report that your Zodiac sign may be different than what you thought it was...

Don’t worry, I’m not preaching astrology this morning.

But I was fascinated to learn that I’ve spent my entire life thinking that I was a Scorpio...and now, according to NASA, I’m a Libra??!!

Well, I did a little digging, and I learned that’s not quite right, NASA didn’t change the Zodiac signs...this kind of thing happens every so often. It has to do with a 13th constellation, and the wobble of the earth, and there’s a couple different ways of figuring out what sign you actually are...I’m not sure I really understand all of it.¹

But did you catch what I said, just a few seconds ago?

I said, “Don’t worry, I’m not preaching astrology, don’t worry...”

I said “Don’t worry” because I didn’t want anyone to think that your preacher was confusing Christianity with astrology...

But on another level, I didn’t want you to worry, because I assume that on any given Sunday, you and I might enter this room with a heart full of worry.

Did you bring any worries with you into this sanctuary this morning?

¹ I first learned of this in a Time magazine article, <https://newsfeed.time.com/2011/01/13/horoscope-hang-up-earth-rotation-changes-zodiac-signs/>. There many articles about this on the Internet.

- Maybe some of you are worried about a loved one's diagnosis right now.
- Maybe there's someone in the pews who's worried about being in too much debt right now.
- Maybe you're worried that your grown-up child will be ok.
- I bet there's more than a few of you worried about what will happen on Tuesday, and whether our country will be ok...

Did you bring any worries with you to church this morning?

I ask not because worry is our topic for today.
But it is where I want to begin.

In our text for today, Paul writes:
“Do not worry about anything...”

Why does he say this?
Paul, of all people, knows what it is to worry!

As he wrote to the church in Corinth, I have been through “many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.”

Why does Paul say, almost in passing, “Don't worry...”???

For starters, when Paul writes to the Philippians in today's passage, he mentions two people who are CLEARLY worried about something.

Preoccupied by something. Distracted by some disagreement.

“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord...and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel.”

How many of you, before this very moment, have EVER given ANY thought to Euodia and Syntyche before?

Right.

We know next to nothing about them.

They didn't travel with Paul, like Timothy traveled with Paul.

I don't recall any classes on Euodia or Syntyche in three years of study in seminary.

I do know that in 26 years of preaching, this is the first time I've ever mentioned them from the pulpit. Heck, I had to look up how to pronounce their names before I stepped into the pulpit. And yet, Euodia and Syntyche were clearly important people to Paul.

Maybe they were leaders of house churches in Philippi, who knows.

We don't know what they were worried about.

We don't know what they were disagreeing about.

What we do know is how Paul referred to these women who struggled with Paul for the sake of the gospel.

He calls them saints.

That's our topic for today.

What makes a saint.

You see, Paul begins his letter to the Philippians like this:

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...”

It means that every single member of that Philippian church—no matter their fears, no matter their faith, no matter their doubts, no matter their worries—is, in Paul’s mind, a saint.

And one of the gifts that Paul gives to Presbyterian churches like Westminster...is what it means to be a saint.

How does Paul understand this word?

Easy.

How many of you have been called by God?

Claimed by God?

Marked as God’s own, forever?

Every single one of you, whether you raised your hand or not.

By definition, it is God’s call and claim on your life...that makes you a saint.

Think about that for a moment.

Consider how different that is from how we typically think about saints. We say, “Oh, what a saint!” –when someone does something especially thoughtful or generous.

We hear “saint,” and we think Mother Theresa.

We think Dorothy Day.

But according to Paul, we’ve got it backwards.

To be a saint...is not first because of what we do.

It’s because of what God does.

To be a saint...is not an achievement, or something we gain.

It’s something we’re GIVEN.

It's an identity that comes directly from God.

All of us in God's church today, and all who came before us in God's church yesterday—complex people, sinful people, faithful people, worried people...all, according to Paul, are saints.

It's our deepest identity, one that is unshakeable.

And I think it's one of the most radical things that Paul ever has to say.

Because according to Paul, the One who spun the planets and came in Jesus Christ is also the One who promises to come alive in me and in you.

No matter our past.
No matter our pain.

Nothing that has happened or that will happen can prevent the living Christ from being at work in you!

I'm thinking of a person named Carla.
Carla was in the first church that a colleague of mine once served.

Carla never missed worship.
She was always at the early service, and afterwards she shared coffee and conversation with everyone around her.

She was always joyful.
She laughed easily.
She was sunshine, someone who knew how to lift another person's spirit.

Now Carla's husband was a sailor.
Not professionally, but it was his passion.
And he taught their boys, at a young age, how to sail.

By the time they were in middle school, Carla's boys knew their way around a boat.

And one day, after their son Phillip had graduated from college, he and some buddies took the boat and headed out to sea. Carla said the storm came out of nowhere.

It took them days to find the boat.
They never did find the boys.

My colleague says that,
in one of his more clumsy,
early-on-in-ministry moments,
he asked Carla, "How did you get over your grief?"

She smiled and replied:

"Mothers don't get over that. But I learned something when I was in the valley of the shadow. It took a long time, but I began to see that we all have sadness. Everyone knows heartbreak.

"Every day the sadness is waiting. I don't know if it will come with my coffee and the morning paper, or if it will speak to me in the grocery store, or if it will penetrate my dreams. But every day I pray, God, don't let the sadness win.

“It’s not much,” she said, “but I think it’s my ministry...to push back the sadness not only in my life, but in the lives of everyone I meet.”²

Now...was Carla able to do that because she had some special, saintly genes inside of her?

Paul would say no.

Paul says that it wasn’t in her nature.

It was in God’s nature.

It was God, through the risen Christ, at work in Carla’s life.

That’s why Paul says not to worry.

Who we are and whose we are, as saints of God—it can never be taken away!

It’s why he writes:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

Paul writes those words from a prison cell.

Paul knows all too well the worries and disappointment and sadness that life brings.

But Paul’s point is that even in those moments, especially in those moments, we cannot lose the identity that God has already given us. Our job, our calling, if you will—is to live into that identity. To live into that promise.

The promise that God will be at work in us, through us, in ways we cannot predict or plan or foresee.

² As told by Tom Are, Jr., in *Joy Even on Your Worst Days: Wisdom from Philippians*, Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021.

Let me get at it like this.

Not too long ago, I attended a training for Westminster members volunteering as tutors at Pleasant Valley. When Leda, the director of the Pleasant Valley program, came to talk with us, she was remarkable.

She thanked our church members for volunteering.
She spoke about the difference that tutoring makes for those children.

And then she said something that I am never going to forget.
She was speaking about why she does what she does.
She explained it this way:

“When I get to the end of my time on this earth, I want to be empty.”

Empty.
I’d never heard it put that way before.

So much of our life and the way we live tells us we need to be full.
Full of friends.
Full calendar of activities.
Full of family pictures to post on Instagram.

And don’t get me wrong, none of that is bad.
It’s just not the goal.
It’s not our deepest identity.

As saints of God, our goal...isn’t to fill our lives.
It’s to empty our lives.

To let go of our imagination about what our life should look like.
And let God's imagination for our lives lead the way...

Have you ever seen someone do that?

Have you ever seen someone empty themselves, letting go of their hopes for the sake of someone else?

Last week at this time, I was planning on providing you with a beautiful baseball illustration in this sermon from the World Series. But for the life of me, I can't seem to remember now who was playing in the World Series this year.

Just seems to be a strange case of amnesia or something.
So instead of baseball, how about softball?

What I haven't forgotten is the story of a women's collegiate softball game that took place 16 years ago.

Back in 2008, Sara Tucholsky was a softball player for Western Oregon University. They were playing Central Washington in a softball game that would decide who got to go to the Division II college playoffs.

Sara had never hit a home run before in her life.
Not in high school.
Not in college.

But somehow, in this all-important game, she did it! She crushed a pitch over the fence in left-center field. And she was so thrilled, that in her excitement running around the bases, Sara missed first base.

Not a big deal, when she realized her mistake.

All she had to do was calmly go back, touch first, and then continue around the bases.

But at that moment, Sara panicked.

She tried to get back to touch first as quickly as she could, and in changing direction so quickly, she hurt her knee.

She injured it so badly, she could no longer walk, never mind run around the bases.

She was on her knees, crawling back to first base.

None of her teammates were allowed to help her.

If they had, it would have been an out.

But then, out of the blue, two of the opposing players from Central Washington—Mallory Holtman and Liz Wallace—they came over and asked Sara if they could pick her up.

It wasn't against the rules, they checked with the ump.

And Sara said yes.

And they carried Sara around the bases, letting her down very gently, every 60 feet, so that her good leg could touch each base.³

It meant they wouldn't win the championship.

It meant they would miss the playoffs!

Can I put it like this?

They emptied themselves that day.

They knew that they had a deeper identity than being a member of their own team.

³ "Sara Tucholsky Home Run/ESPY Sportsmanship Moment," found at [Sara Tucholsky Home Run/ESPY Sportsmanship Moment - YouTube](#).

They let go of their picture of how that day should go, in order to get Sara Tucholsky where she needed to go.

Let me submit to you, on this All Saints' Sunday, that it's the same reason, the only reason, any of us are here today.

Someone else carried us.

Someone else emptied themselves for you, and through the grace of God, they got you where you needed to go.

In just a couple of moments, you'll be invited to put the names of those who did that for you on a remembrance card.

Now when you leave here today, I think Paul would suggest that, as saints, we all need to consider ways to empty our lives for someone else. But there's one thing I think Paul would let you keep.

And that's the card.

The remembrance card.

I think Paul would say, Keep the card.

Paul would say, the next time you do the laundry, make sure that remembrance card isn't in your pocket and doesn't accidentally end up in the laundry.

And the next time you're in the car—put that card next to you, in your cupholder, so that when you're on your way to work, and you get to a stoplight, you can read the names on that card...and you can remember who you are before you get to work.

Put it on your bedside table, so that when you go to sleep at night, you can see the names on that card, and remember who you are, and

whose you are, and the communion of the saints to which each of you belong...before you fall asleep.

That is your deepest identity.

Not your worries.

Not your fears.

Just like Euodia and Syntyche, your name and all the names on your card...they are written in the book of life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.