

Saints...Sinners Shaped By Grace

Romans 12:13a

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Contemporary artist Billy Joel has a song that says “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints - sinners are much more fun...” This sentiment is wide spread in our society. Most of us don’t see our connection with the saints, and many of us would rather not align ourselves too much with the sinners but few of us have trouble finding our fun! Even if we don’t see ourselves as “saints” we want to be good, but being good is hard work and not so much fun...so many of us settle for “good enough” and “opt out” of the process of being shaped by grace, the grace that accepts us for who we are and loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. Those devices include our natural tendencies to sin...that is to do, say or think things that separate us from God, others and our true selves. Being shaped by grace is finding the balance between being saints within the structure of love, and sinners with the security of forgiveness. All Fall, in this sermon series on “Grace Happens,” we’ve been looking at this balance of being shaped by grace. Our texts for this week and next, addresses this balance in still another way.

In order to adhere to Paul’s admonition “contribute to the needs of the saints” we first have to figure out who they are. I’ve already said that many of us don’t see ourselves as “saints” but that’s what we’re called in Scripture. In both the Old and the New Testaments, the saints are the believers. The psalmist says, “Love the Lord, all you his saints,” [Psalm 31:23] and throughout the New Testament including most of the openings to Paul’s letters, the saints are the believers. By definition, a saint is one who is set a part, separate or holy. Now, we may not feel very holy and we may not think the person in the pew next to us is very holy, but since the beginning of the church, all of us “sinners” that make up the church have been called the communion of saints! From the New Testament, to the Apostles’ Creed, to the Reformers to modern theologians...there has been this paradox of sinners being saints. Accepting that paradox enables us to then follow Paul’s admonition, if we are to contribute to the needs of the saints, we are to contribute to the needs of one another. Contributing does not earn us grace because by definition grace cannot be earned: contributing is our grateful response to grace shaping our lives, that transforming process from sinners into saints.

As we heard in our reading from Acts, it is said of the first Christians that, “with glad and generous hearts” they worshipped and shared what they had with one another. “With glad and generous hearts” is our theme for this stewardship season. Stewardship is challenging at anytime but in this time of financial flux and uncertainty, when many are already being stretched, it is even more so. Because of that, it can be difficult to respond with gladness and generosity, and it can also be strange to hear that we are to contribute to the needs of the saints, most of us will resonate more with next week’s focus, “extend hospitality to strangers” but again we hear in a different way that our gifts are for the building up of the church and for service in the world. We will look more at that next week but today I want us to look at the joy of being the communion of saints and to help us I want to share with you a joyful experience and insight I had while sailing on vacation.

I was on a catamaran with nine other passengers and two crew. We were sailing from Maui to Lanai. I was up sitting upfront with my legs pushed through the roping at the end of the trampoline, my feet splashing in the water as we went over the swells, looking out on the horizon. All at once, off to my left, there were three simultaneous splashes. One of the crew people, Lacy, and I said about the same time, “did you see that?” Now you may or may not know, since I was a little girl, I’ve loved dolphins. To think I had just seen three in their natural inhabitant made my spirit soar! Then suddenly, within seconds we were surrounded by a pod of fifty or sixty spinner dolphins! Glorious, beautiful, playful, joyful animals swimming and jumping all around us! Together they were searching for food and protecting each other...just “being the pod.” As we were watching the spinners, a different kind of dolphin, a bottlenose dolphin, the kind that Flipper was ~ the kind we usually see in captivity, jumped fully out of the water, tail and all, twisted in the air and re-entered the water. It was incredible. We only saw her twice. But the Spinners were everywhere. Spinners are shades of grey except they have white bellies. Lacy, the crew person said, watch, when they show off ~ their tummies get a pinkish glow. Sure enough one came up under the catamaran, jumped and as she turned we could see her blush! It was awesome!

When I commented that there were so many, Lacy told us that what you see on top is about a ¼ to a 1/5 of the pod, which meant that traveling with us or we with them, there was 200-250 spinner dolphins! The ones below take turns coming to the surface. Then the insight struck me; this is what we do as the church! One fourth to one fifth of us at any given time, no matter how big or small the congregation, is up front, on the surface so to speak, leading in worship, serving in mission, working on committees, volunteering in programs. Then some trade places, others coming forward and the ones who were just forward, rest. Some just lay low, nurturing others. Some are vigilantly working to protect the vulnerable. One or two or more are different but still intricate, vital members. Some show off...blushing or not. But all together, we share in being the church...the joyful, glorious communion of saints!

And when our work is done, on this day every year, All Saints’ Day, we honor those who rest eternally from their labors, recognizing that they have joined the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us with hope and inspiration to continue our lives as the saints we are, “spinners” being shaped by grace!

Amen!