

## How to become a saint

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I wonder if any of you are aware of the history of Communion of Saints or All Saints' Sunday? Originally, it was a feast day meant to commemorate a rather exclusive list of spiritual celebrities. In the high Middle Ages, prior to the Reformation, more and more individuals were being officially canonized—sometimes for good deeds and miracles and sometimes for more dubious political or monetary contributions to the church. But in any case, the calendar of saints' holy days was getting pretty full. So the Western church invented All Saints' Day as a day to honour all the “minor” saints whom there wasn't room for on the official docket.

Now, when the Reformation occurred in the early 1500s, the Reformers at that time were in no way interested in carrying on this tradition of commemorating these pious ‘superstars.’ Within the Reformed tradition, the idea of revering people the way one might revere God was out of the question. Especially when some of those people may have swindled their way into sainthood through monetary contributions or political power.

Over time things have changed and many traditions have recovered the observance of this day, but we have given it a rather different emphasis. We now use this day to honour the priesthood of *all* believers, indeed, the *saint-hood* of all believers! This is not a day to venerate a select number of superstars of the faith, but a time to recognize that all of us as Christians together—both the living and the departed—are saints of God—that “great cloud of witnesses,” as we heard in our reading from Hebrews.

In the New Testament, “saints” is the most commonly used title for Christians. It literally means “holy ones,” and was used to refer to Jesus-followers because they were considered to be consecrated or dedicated to God—holy. Saints aren’t just older people, or wiser people, or people who pray without ceasing, or people who are no longer alive—saints are both young and old, both living and departed; they are all who have responded affirmatively to God’s call.

Sounds easy enough to call oneself a saint then, doesn’t it? Or does it? How do we as the saints who make up the church, the vehicle of Christ’s glory in this world, live into this notion of being God’s holy ones? How can we continue to reflect and live out hope and faith in God’s promises? We didn’t have to complete a specific test in order to become saints—we must only believe; believe in the One who was sent to this earth to bring us life. But while sainthood isn’t a certificate or a degree we can earn, while it isn’t a job we can train for over the course of a few hours, it is something that we can practice and live into each day. There are ways to embrace our sainthood more fully.

Perhaps one of the most basic things we have to accept is that we are both saints and sinners. When I was talking with Michael Nettleton earlier this week about this being Communion of Saints' Sunday, he told me a story about the time he was a commissioner at the 132nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. At the first morning worship, the minister leading worship called out to everyone in the room, "Good morning, Saints!" And everyone enthusiastically replied, "Good morning!" And then the worship leader called out, "Good morning, Sinners!" And there was an awkward silence in the room. The minister admonished the commissioners that this was not the response she expected. So, she said, "Let's try this again. Good morning, Saints!" And everyone said "Good morning!" And then, "Good morning, Sinners!" And this time everyone replied, "Good morning!"

I like this story because it reminds us of a major factor about sainthood, about being part of the priesthood of all believers: we are also sinners; we are flawed, broken and imperfect. But through God's grace, we can hold both of those words; we are both sinners and saints. Being flawed, being broken, being imperfect, none of that takes away or lessens our love and commitment to the wider church, our love and commitment to God, nor our belief in new life through Christ. It doesn't diminish our ability to rejoice, or our desire to praise, or our drive to share our spiritually given gifts. However, we are not to shrug off our shortcomings, failures and imperfections, either—this is why we have a communion of saints around us to turn to for help, for support, for prayers. We need not turn to only one person—to myself or to Harris or to any of the other ministers associated with our church. We are all saints, we are all priests.

The term "priesthood of all believers" is a Reformed Christian understanding that we all, clergy and laity alike, have been given direct access to God through Christ, and therefore we all hold the role of priest. It's why we have elders in our church; everyday people who are elected by other everyday members of our church to share the responsibilities within our church, from faith formation to fiscal wellbeing. We do this because we believe and think it is important that all Christians be a part of the teaching, leading, development and care of the church and its congregants. God is equally accessible to all the faithful, and every Christian has equal potential to minister for God. We are all ambassadors of Christ. We are all God's holy ones. We are all saints.

Being a priest, a saint, a holy one, it can seem a rather big responsibility. This has big implications for our personal spirituality and public life in the Church and the world: as a believer, you are a priest regardless of your full-time occupation. Whether you're a bartender or lawyer, you can do priestly work. Whether you're a school teacher or a student, you can do priestly work. Whether you're a baker or knitter, you can do priestly work. There is no hierarchy where priesthood is a "vocation" and baking is not. Both are tasks that God has called followers to do, each according to their gifts. Being a saint means embracing your role as a leader in ministry. You are called, no matter your

occupation, no matter your gifts, to use your everyday actions to serve others, to act justly, to be compassionate, to show love.

During our time at the Women's Retreat that just over 20 women from Armour Heights attended last weekend, Rev. Deb led us in a reflective activity. Part of this was to share a photo of a woman who inspired our faith or helped develop our faith. Many shared photos and stories of their mothers. These weren't women who were clergy in the church, but they shared their faith in ways that left an impact, that, years later, brought tears to our eyes just thinking about their selflessness through struggles, their compassion in the face of hardship, their faithfulness through the highs and the lows. They were and are saints.

We get a glimpse of the way faith is passed on through our scripture from Hebrews. The author takes us through a synopsis of Moses and his faithfulness to God, as well as the faithfulness of those around him. "By faith," we are told, Moses was hidden by his parents as a baby. "By faith" he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter and chose to suffer alongside his people. "By faith" he left Egypt and persevered despite difficulties. "By faith" the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, escaping the oncoming Egyptian army. All this occurred by faith. The scripture goes on to list a great many others who did things by faith: Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel. . . We follow in the footsteps of people from the earliest biblical times who were unsure of what the future held for them. We follow in the footsteps of saints who along the way chose to trust God anyway. We follow a God who does not abandon us in times of trouble.

Though we may be saints and priests, we still know what it means to suffer. All those saints who came before us both biblically and in our personal lives? They knew suffering. They knew hardship. But they persevered in faithfulness. Rather than trusting only in themselves, they trusted in God. I saw it written once that the opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is control. How can we show our faithfulness, live out our faithfulness, if we refuse to trust in God, our Maker? If we refuse to let go of the reins and insist on only ourselves and our own limited understanding, how can our faith ever be lived out, be passed down? Did Moses know exactly what God had planned for his future? No. But by faith he had trust in God. Those in the Hebrew Bible who were forward looking and trusted God, even if they could not see where God was leading, received their reward. Similarly, we must trust the God who stayed true to our ancestors in faith and will stay true to us. When we follow the path of staying focused on Jesus Christ our saviour, we are able to see the joy in life despite the suffering. This is the faith passed on to us from past generations. This is the faith that affects us today. This is the faith we will continue to pass on into the future.

Acting in faith, trusting in God, being an active part of the priesthood of all believers, these are all elements that make us saints, that separate us as holy ones. When we look at the letter written to the Ephesians, we notice another key feature of sainthood—hope.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, he prayed that his hearers' hearts may be flooded with light, so that they may know the hope to which Christ calls them. What does this mean—to understand the hope that we're called to? When we see only with our eyes or hear only with our ears, we may fail to lay claim or affirm the hope instilled in us. To see with the heart is to imagine the future God is preparing. As Christians we are shaped by more than our own experiences, or even the experiences of those who came before us; we are shaped by our hopes, by the future into which we are living, and by the convictions by which we are living. As I saw it written recently, "hope is best perceived with the eyes of the heart. Hope is best lived within the hopeful community, in the company of saints both living and departed." We're a *communion* of hope-filled saints, not individual saints out to try and change the world all on our own.

As we celebrate another anniversary within Armour Heights Church, we have the opportunity to reflect on who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. In fact, it's something you will see reflected in the art display created at the Women's Retreat last weekend, which I hope you'll take some time to look at during our time of fellowship following the service. We are a communion of saints whose members have answered the call from God; who have used that call to act as priests, to form faith, to show trust in God (even through great struggles), and lived in hope of the future of God's work.

Later this month, some will express their calling from God in special ways: through baptism and through membership. These are important parts of our call. We are not called to be super-pious or to give money in greater amounts or to pray with more conviction. We do not baptize or encourage membership in order to make people pure or perfect. In baptism and in membership we rise again to new life—a life of complexity and richness, a life of community, a life led as a member of the body of Christ—a life of service as saints, as God's holy ones.

May we leave from this place today encouraged by the faith of our ancestors and inspired to see with our hearts the hope that is set before us through Christ. May leave this place ready to celebrate the sainthood of one another and the unique gifts we are each called to serve with as members of the priesthood of all believers. And may we continue to reflect upon and live out the hope and faith in God's promises. Amen.