

### Biblical Saints

*“The spirit helps us in our weakness.*

*That very spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words....*

*The spirit intercedes for the Saints according to the will of God.”*

So writes St. Paul in today's second reading,

I want to reflect on his use of the word **“Saint.”**

Because it did not mean the same thing to Paul as it does to us.

To us, a Saint is someone who has been canonized,

someone who has led a virtuous life. For Paul and his Jewish ancestors,

**Saint** meant something entirely different.

For them, a Saint wasn't someone who necessarily led a virtuous life,

but someone who, however unvirtuous, was suddenly called by God and,

perhaps even to their own surprise, responded.

That's why, to use a racy example, Scripture can refer to a prostitute,

as a Saint. Why? Because of her faith in God who called

and to whom she responded.

Let me fill you in on this Old Testament story, which reads like a TV script:

Joshua, Moses' successor, has led the army of Israel

to the threshold of the promised land.

Then spies are sent to reconnoiter Jericho.

As soldiers often do, they end up at Rehab's place

in the seedy section of town.

(Rehab is the prostitute I mentioned before.)

Somehow, the king received word that spies were about, so he sent his police to seize them.

When the police inquired at Rehab's house, she lied.

Batting her heavy eyelashes, she said,

***“True, a couple of Hebrew boys were here earlier, but when the gate was closed at dark, they left; go quickly and maybe you'll overtake them.”***

The King's men rushed on, not knowing that Madam Rahab had hidden the Israelites on her roof.

Had they been found, it would have cost her, her life.

She knew that, but she did it anyway. Why did she hide them?

Because, she told the spies, she had heard of the mighty works of their God, and so all she asks is that the Israelites show her family mercy when the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

Then, while it was still night, Rahab let them down by a rope, and they tied a scarlet thread in her window to identify her place for the invading Israelites.

When Joshua and his army finally entered the city, the folk of the red thread house in the red-light district were the only ones spared when the invaders leveled Jericho. Today, Rahab is a heroine and celebrated.

But it gives us pause. A prostitute. A liar. What kind of saint is that?

What's worse. She's not alone. Drunken, naked Noah,

Abraham and his squabbling family, old mean-spirited, conniving Sarah,  
murderer Moses, lustful David, bigoted Paul:

we would label them all unholy.

Yet the Bible honors them as Saints. If that puzzles you – and it should –  
remember that the Bible simply has a different notion of sainthood  
than we do.

As I said before, a biblical Saint is not a person who has been virtuous  
throughout his or her life. No, biblical saintliness is a matter of  
what God does with people and how they respond.

In the Bible, a person is regarded as a Saint

because God wants that person to do something holy,

**not** because that person is holy.

Biblical Saints are those who are called to do God's work,

no matter how unworthy or shady they are, and, who accept the call.

Sainthood in the Bible means being commanded by God,

no matter how wicked you are, and doing what God wants.

In short, biblical Saints are those who listen to God and who say “**yes**” –

at least for this one, critical time – regardless of mess they are,

and the risk they have to take. It's their moment of grace,

as it were, and they take it. And all is redeemed.

I kind of like that definition better than ours,  
which insists on continuous, wondrous virtue and nobility in its Saints.

In the Bible, an evil person can claim sainthood  
by accepting a noble deed, regardless of the cost.

Oskar Schindler, by all accounts a despicable man,  
risked his life to save countless Jews during the Holocaust.

Sydney Carlton, a quite self-centered character  
in Charles Dickens *Tale of Two Cities*,  
took another 's place on the gallows.

A mean, sleazy, chronically trouble-making soldier walks into certain death  
by distracting the enemy while his companions flee to safety.

These are biblical Saints.

The Berlin Wall once separated free West Germany  
from imprisoned East Germany.

Thousands of people died over the years  
trying to cross that wall to freedom.

A small boy is standing on the East side of the wall,  
his chubby hands wide open.

Suddenly, a young communist border guard,  
known to be a thief and a drug dealer, looks all around  
and then gingerly lifts the child over the fence, into freedom.

That young guard was arrested soon after  
for his compassionate act and shot. He is a biblical Saint.

What the Bible is saying is that for all of us, there is, there will be,

a golden moment of heroism.

It need not be large or dramatic or mighty or earth-shaking.

It can be something as quiet as taking the blame for someone else  
and living with a disgrace, or keeping a secret  
that would destroy another's career –  
things you might not ordinarily do.

But this time, God calls you to do the noble thing, and for some reason,  
maybe one not even clear to yourself, you say **“yes”**.

Or in a lifetime of selfishness, you are presented with the opportunity  
to do a totally selfless act of love and generosity,  
and, uncharacteristically, you grasp it.

For once in your life, as the saying goes,

you do something profoundly decent, and in that moment  
all your sins are forgiven. No matter what your history,  
how bad a person you have been,

how tepid and indifferent a Christian, you become a biblical Saint.

Charity covers a multitude of sins.

So, friends, I say to you, there is a moment beckoning you.

There is a call calling you. There is a crossroad ahead.

Somewhere down the road, there is a selfless act,  
a chance for heroism, waiting.

You may not be a Saint according to the standards of our Church today.

But, if you seize the day and say **“yes”** to your God-given moment,  
you will be a Saint according to the Bible. Amen.