

November 3, 2019 “Saint who? Saint YOU!”

It has been said, “Be contented with what you have, but never too contented with what you are.”

There is a story that comes out of Asia about a farmer who saw a tiger’s tail swishing between two large rocks. In a moment of haste, he grabbed the tail and pulled. All of a sudden he realized he had an angry tiger by the tail and only two rocks stood between him and the tiger’s teeth and claws! So there he remained, afraid to loosen his grip on the enraged animal’s tail lest he surely be killed. A monk happened by and the farmer called out in desperation, “Come over here and help me kill this tiger.” The holy man said, “Oh, no. I cannot do that. I cannot take the life of another.” Then he went on to deliver a homily against killing. All the while, the farmer was holding tightly to the tail of an angry tiger. Then the monk finally finished his sermon, the farmer pleaded, “If you won’t kill the tiger, then at least come hold its tail while I kill it.” The monk thought that perhaps it would be all right to simply hold the tiger’s tail, so he grabbed hold and pulled. The farmer, however, turned and walked away down the road. The monk shouted after him, “Come back here and kill the tiger!” “Oh, no,” the farmer replied. “You have converted me!”

What is conversion? It is change. With money, conversion can be the change of a bill into coin or the change of currency from one country into that of another.

On the human level, conversion can be a change in beliefs, a change in ideas, a change in attitudes, a change in behaviors or even a change in priorities. To say, “I’m a changed person!” is to say you have somehow been converted.

There are two things I’ve learned about conversion and change. The first is that conversion is not a bad thing. To say you’ve been converted to something does not make you a fanatic. It means you’ve changed your mind or your outlook. If the largest room in the world is “room for improvement,” then it is good to leave plenty of room for change.

And that’s the second thing I’ve learned about conversion – it’s an ongoing process. I always want to leave room for change, room to keep growing. To say, “I’ve been converted and that’s that,” is to say you have decided to quit growing. If life is about anything, it is about growing. The day I quit changing and learning is the day I die.

I like the old southern American slave’s prayer: “I ain’t what I ought to be and I ain’t what I’m agoin’ to be. But I give thanks that I ain’t what I used to be.” Change, for him, has been a good thing and it’s not over yet. Here is a person whose life is like an on-going journey. He is always growing. Always changing. Always becoming. And always aware there’s a little more room for improvement.

Is there a better way to live? And so today, we reflect on the conversions in our lives that lead us to ponder who is a saint? And are we saints in God’s eyes?

Have we converted our souls, our actions, our intentions to properly portray ourselves as saints?

In our own daily lives and struggles, we have the opportunity to continue the tradition of sainthood. We can love and help not only the oppressed, but also those who oppress and exclude us. True sainthood is a personal daily decision to love in spite of what others say or do to ignore or hurt us.

As believers, we have the opportunity to live as saints by loving, helping and accepting those both on the margins and those who hate, exclude and revile us. We can offer hope that this love is what allows us to see God's power at work here on earth. Jesus equalizes all of humanity by disturbing the comfortable and comforting the disturbed. Sainthood here on earth requires that we overturn self-serving value systems to ensure the divine inheritance is available to all. Just as Jesus offered to spend time with Zacchaeus, who goes out a limb to be in Jesus' presence, so too are we called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and love the stranger. But by living with this gospel calling, based on Christ's teachings, we in turn become the living saints of today.

The Festival of All Saints dates to May 13, 609 (or maybe 610) when Pope Boniface IV consecrated the Pantheon in Rome to the Blessed Virgin and all the martyrs. Pope Gregory III is credited with first moving the festival to its present date of November 1. After the Reformation, the celebration was retained in

Anglican and most Lutheran churches. Other Protestants, including Presbyterians and Methodists, celebrate All Saints Day, usually on the first Sunday in November. And so that brings us to today.

This is all well and good, but just what is a saint? In the Roman Catholic tradition, someone receiving the title of “Saint” has been officially recognized by the Catholic Church (canonized) and therefore believed to be in Heaven. Others tell us that a saint lived a life with so much love towards God and people that their approach was a total surrender of Jesus and that the Church thus recognizing them as heroes or heroines worthy to be held up for our inspiration. They remind us that the Church is holy, can never stop being holy and is called to show the holiness of God by living the life of Christ. Luther would expand the idea of sainthood to include all Christians on earth and in heaven.

There are saints in ancient history who have passed away, saints the church recognizes, and then there are people of more modern history who I would call saints: Martin Luther King, Jr., Jean Vanier, Harriet Tubman, Tommy Douglas, Mother Teresa, Stephen Lewis, Greta Thunberg, and many more. Saints don’t have halos, robes or long white beards. They wear jeans, or ordinary clothes like you and me, or clothes suited to their culture or suited to their nature – whatever that may be at the time. What I’m trying to say is that they are ordinary people with extraordinary love. They listen and they respond, they hear and they answer, they

see a need and witness to God's call. Someone once defined a saint as a person who lives in the loving embrace of God.

This Sunday, as we remember the saints who have gone before, who have lived lives of faith, and who struggled with the temptations and evil of the world, let us also remember as we look around the sanctuary, that we are in the company of saints—the congregation of God's people gathered in a particular place at a particular time. We gather fully aware of our sin and confessing it in the presence of God and one another, we meet in Jesus' name, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, we are strengthened for the journey, and as Thomas Merton reminds us: "We can only become saints by facing ourselves, by assuming full responsibility for our lives just as they are, with all their limitations and handicaps, and submitting ourselves to the purifying and transforming action of the Savior."

So when one of God's people asks you who and what a "saint" really is, you may look that person in the eye and say "Saint who? Saint YOU—everyday saint and sinner, made holy through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen.