

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, November 12, 2023
10am

Text: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

Theme: Season of Saints: Stories of the Saints

[prayer]

Last week, we began our short study of the marks of sainthood by exploring what saints wear. We were reminded by John's vision in Revelation that saints wear the compassion of Christ by drawing near to their suffering neighbors.

On our church Facebook page this week, we shared a little prayer by Stan Mitchell, a Nashville-based pastor who has chosen to walk closely with his suffering neighbors in the LGBTQ+ community. Every morning he prays this:

Sweetest Christ,

If today, my presence in the lives of others can lessen some of their pain, can diminish some of their suffering...

Or if today, by being with another person I can even slightly increase their joy, even remotely nurture their peace...

Then I will have lived meaningfully; I will have approached what I have little by little come to believe is the essential heart of Jesus, of what it means to be fully human.¹

This prayer points to a deep connection between the compassionate heart of Jesus and the fullness of our humanity. The story of Jesus is a story of a God who chose to draw near to human beings and walk with us. In that story we see the essential heart of Jesus – a heart bent on salvation. Salvation is, simply put, a form of healing. John Wesley spoke of salvation as the healing of the image of God inside each of us. When we draw close to the heart of Jesus, to the simple and

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/stan.mitchell.58>

loving way that Jesus lived, we discover a way of living that heals and restores our connection to God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

Simple does not mean easy. It just means uncomplicated. The way that Jesus chose to live and love was indeed uncomplicated. A saint seeks to understand and learn this simple and loving way of living. But to do this a saint must first remember that our love does not spring from a vacuum. If God is Love, then the love we express comes from God. The love we show God, neighbor, and self is always a response to the love that God first showed us.

Today we are focusing on the stories that saints tell. Whether we are speaking of the historic saints of the church, the everyday saints who have walked with us in faith, or the saints we hope to become, all saints' stories have one thing in common. They all begin and end with the God who loved and called us first.

[pause]

In our Scripture lesson we overheard a public conversation between Joshua and the elders of the tribes of Israel. This was long before the time of Jesus, but the Bible draws clear parallels between Jesus and Joshua, whose names share the same root; both mean "God is our salvation." Joshua was Moses' successor. It was Joshua who led the Hebrew people into the Promised Land. And now, at the end of his life, years after the people received the Ten Commandments at Sinai, Joshua pauses to ask the people whether they are still committed to the covenant God made with them.

He begins by telling the people a story. It is a story of a people who worshipped foreign gods in a foreign place. Before God called their ancestor Abraham into the Promised Land, Abraham lived across the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia and worshiped the gods of that land. Abraham made a conscious choice to follow the God of Israel. But first the LORD chose Abraham. God called a man who did not know or worship Him. Even so, God chose Abraham to father God's chosen people. Abraham made the choice to trust this God. But it was the LORD who chose first, the LORD who acted first, the LORD who loved first.

This is your story, too. Before you chose God, God chose you. We call this first choice prevenient grace – the grace that goes before us. Before we even know Who God is, God is calling us.

If you are here today, then you chose to respond to that experience of prevenient grace. You heard God calling and you took steps to acknowledge that call. Perhaps you chose to be baptized or, if you were baptized as an infant, you chose to be confirmed. Perhaps you chose to connect with a community of faith for the first time; perhaps that community is *this* community! Perhaps you chose to raise your family in the church and pass the stories of Jesus on to another generation. And over the years you have learned what it means to foster this relationship, to seek after the heart of our God, a heart that beats to know and love and heal God’s children. You nurture that relationship through your choices. A life of faithful discipleship is never just one decision. Discipleship is a series of decisions to keep learning the simple and loving way of Jesus.

But every time you make that choice, do not forget that God has made a choice, too. God made a choice with Abraham. God made a choice with Moses. God made a choice at Sinai. God made a choice at the Incarnation and the Crucifixion and again at the Resurrection. God made a choice when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the church. And even today, as we struggle to follow the simple and loving way of Jesus and be his body on this earth, God keeps making a choice.

That choice is grace.

The stories saints tell are wonderfully diverse and unique, but they always begin with grace. God’s grace calls, and a saint answers. God’s grace moves, and a saint follows. God’s grace sends, and a saint goes.

[pause]

We can also choose not to answer, not to follow, not to love. This is the free will God has granted us. Grace does not coerce. In fact, grace expects us to choose wrong sometimes. We acknowledge this when we declare at the communion table: “We turned away, and our love failed, but your love remained steadfast.”²

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/a-service-of-word-and-table-i-and-introductions-to-the-other-forms>

Joshua challenges the people, “If it seems wrong...to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD” (v. 15 CEB). Joshua is clear that the choice not to serve the LORD is still a choice. We all serve someone or something, even if just ourselves.

Joshua declares his choice before the people. But he is skeptical they share the same commitment. The people protest, “After all that the LORD has done for us, of course we will serve Him!” (vv. 16-18 paraphrased). But Joshua is not convinced. The biblical narrative bears out his skepticism. Moses had barely finished recording the Ten Commandments and already the people had made the choice to succumb to their fear and worship an idol. Joshua was speaking to a generation barely removed from slavery in a foreign land among foreign gods. The covenant with the LORD was still young and it had already been broken once. Now that they were in the Promised Land, they faced a new set of foreign gods. The temptation to turn away from the LORD was always present.

Joshua warns the people of the consequences they will face if they promise to serve the LORD but fail to follow through. He wants them to make this covenant with sober minds and hearts, not glibly. And so he presses them on their commitment: “Focus your hearts on the LORD, the God of Israel” (v. 23).

[pause]

Friends, we may not have erected a literal golden calf in our backyards, but despite our best intentions, we have all succumbed to the temptation to stray. “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.”³ What does that temptation look like in your life right now? [pause] Are you aware of it? If not, ask the Holy Spirit to give you that awareness. For me temptation looks like trying to accomplish this ministry entirely under my own steam. Half the time I am not even aware I am doing that until I start to feel the consequences of my choice. I forget sometimes that ministry is a partnership with God and God is leading the way. God’s grace is always running before me, blazing a path, making a way.

³ https://hymnary.org/text/come_thou_fount_of_every_blessing

A saint is never perfect. Perfection is not a mark of sainthood. John Wesley taught we are going *on to* perfection, and we expect to be made perfect, but we are not perfect yet. And so, a saint's story will always include seasons of doubt, seasons where we choose to forsake the simple and loving way of Jesus for other gods, where we into the temptation to make our way without God. We all struggle with patterns of selfishness or habits or actions or attitudes that destroy our relationships with God, neighbor, and self. And in our struggles, it can be easy to forget the best news of all: We can always make the choice to reach for grace.

Joshua says, *Focus your hearts on the LORD.*

The story that saints tell is the story of grace. And the story of grace is ultimately not about us. The story of grace is all about God. Even when we choose to ignore God, God does not ignore us. Even when we choose to forsake God, God does not forsake us. Even when we choose to wander, God knows exactly where we are.

In Joshua's day, salvation came through the giving of the Law. This is how God chose to reveal Godself to God's people. But in Jesus, salvation has come through the giving of God's very self, God's flesh and blood. Jesus came not to condemn but to heal. The simple and loving way of Jesus is not just for our suffering neighbors. It is for us, too! Grace is our saintly heritage.

[pause]

The people tell Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him" (v. 24). And Joshua builds them a monument at Schechem – the same place where God appeared to their ancestor Abraham to reaffirm the promise of land; the same place where Jacob put away his foreign gods; the same place where Joshua read the law of Moses to the people. Joshua does not build this monument to condemn the people when their nerve fails them, and they choose to abandon the LORD. That day came, repeatedly. It comes for us, too.

No, Joshua builds them a monument so that when their hearts are ready to return to the LORD, they will remember that God's grace never left them.

What choice will you make today? What commitment will you renew? What story will you tell?

Here are our hearts, Lord.
Take and seal them.

Amen.