

The Rev. Charlie Holt:

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word and Your calling upon us to be the saints of God in our day. And so we ask that You would make us the Holy Ones. Fill us with Your Spirit and anoint us to be witnesses in this world to the praise of Your glory. And so now may the preaching of Your Word be Your Word for the sake and glory of Your Son Jesus in His name we pray. Amen.

Please.

So, a question that I have for you is, "Do you think of yourself as a saint?" It's all Saints Day. We're celebrating the saints of God. So, a little introspective question. Are you a saint?

How about a nod or a yes or no? Some say yes. Some say no. I love the movie The Lion King. Has you ever seen that one? It's a children's movie, but it has this main character named Simba, who is the king's son and he goes through hard times and griefs and all the pains of this world. And he ends up out in the woods with a couple of ne'er-do-wells and living the philosophy of a kuna matata. It means no worries. And he just is going about his life as if it has no significance.

And a monkey comes along, it's a baboon or a monkey, and he bonks him on the head. Remember that scene? And he says to him, "You don't know who you are.

You are Mufasa's son."

And he calls him to get back to his identity as a child of the king.

He had been living as if he had no real sense of who he really was.

And I want to challenge you, if you were one of the ones that shook your head, "No, I'm not a saint," to maybe have this be your bonk-on-the-head moment if you need it.

What is it to be a saint? Well, Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes, and I'm going to back up to what's not in your bulletin to Ephesians chapter 1, verse 1, where Paul introduces himself. Back in the old days, they used to put their name at the beginning of a letter, which makes a lot more sense than signing your name at the end of the letter. You have to read the whole letter or skip to the end to find out who sent me this letter, which is really a challenge if it's like three or four pages long. But Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and then he writes who he's writing the letter to, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

In other words, what Paul is saying is that all of the people who were members of the church of Ephesus, which was a city, those who were part of that church in the city of Ephesus, he could have been writing to the church in Jacksonville or the church in Ortega, and that would be us. And he called them all saints.

A lot of times, I think, when we think of saints, we think of dead people like St. Augustine or Mother Teresa or St. Francis, loved animals.

We have in mind people that are holy people, people that did great works for God, maybe even have a few miracles to their name.

But what the Bible teaches is that we are actually, if we are Christians, if we are followers of Jesus Christ, we are all saints. And there are three things I want to highlight. We could say a lot about what it means to be a saint. Paul writes an entire letter about that in his letter to the Ephesians. But I just want to focus on three verses today, and we want to talk about as saints, we are called to be a saint. You are chosen for that role. It is something that is your destiny if you are a saint of God. Secondly, you are commissioned for God's glory. In other words, if you're a saint, you have a purpose. You have something you're supposed to do with your life. And then the third thing is you are sealed as a saint by the Holy Spirit of the living God. First of all, we are called. We are chosen.

Listen to the way Paul puts it in Ephesians 1 verse 11.

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined," you could also translate as predestined, "having been predestined or destined according to the purposes of Him who accomplishes all things according to His counsel and His will."

God has called you according to His plan, His purposes, His sovereign actions. In another place, he says, "You were predestined before even the foundations of the world were laid and chosen by God to be a saint of God."

I sometimes think that we struggle with this, or I know we struggle with this idea of being chosen or predestined because it can sound a little bit arrogant, doesn't it? Well, I'm the chosen one. I remember the story of these two kids that were playing on the playground and getting into a little bit of an argument, as kids sometimes do, and one of the kids started making fun of the other one for being adopted. And she said, "Well, you're adopted."

And the little child responded, "Well, the way I look at it, my parents chose me, yours got stuck with you."

And this is really what it means to be called by God, is that the Lord chooses us, that He elects us. And we'll get into the purpose of why He does that, but the Scriptures don't really give us a specific reason as to why He chooses us, other than it's just His desire, His love, His purpose.

There's an older verse back in the days of Moses when God was choosing Israel for the particular purpose of being a special nation with a unique vocation in this world. And Moses was wrestling with that idea of being chosen, and God says, "Well, I didn't choose you because you were any more numerous than any of the other people, or because you were a more strong nation, or because even you were better people."

In fact, He says, "You actually are stiff-necked and hard-hearted in a stubborn group."

He says, "The reason why I chose you is because I loved you."

Isn't that interesting?

The reason why we are chosen by God is not because we earn it, or because we're better than other people, or because we're smarter than other people, we make better decisions, or if given the chance, we would be more Jesus-focused.

Quite the contrary, He chose us, and He chooses a lot of motley crew. You think about all the people that God has chosen down through the ages, like King David was an adulterer, and Paul was a murderer, and so on. We could go through the list.

It's quite a crew, but He chose us because He loved us.

Now of course, that doesn't mean that we're chosen because we think we're chosen.

We have to actually have been called by God. And this has been one of the challenges that the church has struggled with down through the years, because who are the true people of God, the authentic ones that have been called? Because authentic Christians, we all know, will manifest certain character traits.

The two biggest are that they confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. In other words, they are followers of the truth and the true way, and so they have a faithfulness in their confession and a faithfulness to their upholding of the Word of God. So that's one of the marks of the true people of God, but it's not just talking the talk, it's also what?

Walking the walk.

And so true Christians, we know, will start to manifest the gift of the Holy Spirit of the living God in their lives, and they will show forth, by the way they live, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But there's always been occasions, and this may be the reason why when I asked if you thought of yourself as a saint, you said no, is that even in our own lives we know that we all falter, that we all have failings, that we all sin, that we all miss the mark and fall short of the glory of God and don't live the life or don't talk the talk.

Well, back in the old days of the church, in the times of St. Augustine, there was a controversy that broke out called the Donatist controversy.

And what it was about, there was a time of tremendous persecution of Christians, and this is one of the times when you can really find out who's got the courage of a true Christian and a true believer and who doesn't, is when persecution breaks out. And Emperor Diocletian was very cruel to Christians, and one of the things that he would do is round them up and arrest them, and he would take away their Scriptures from them and their Bibles.

And so, some of the people at that time would willingly give over their Bibles and willingly

compromise with Emperor Diocletian to save their skin and to compromise.

Well, after Emperor Diocletian died and the persecution subsided, some of those people who wanted to come back into the church, and there were a bunch of people who had stood firm and held fast and bore up under the persecution,

and they considered those people who had compromised and given away their Bibles, they actually created a label for them, which was "trepidors," I think is how you say it in Latin, but it's basically those who gave it away.

They were the traitors to the faith.

And it was really hard for those people to be accepted back into the faith, and one of the teachers was a teacher named Donatus, and hence the Donatus controversy, and he believed that the church should be pure and holy, and that the sacraments are only valid if they're performed by holy ministers and received by holy, sainted people.

And so, he said, "We are not receiving back and showing any grace to these traitors."

Well, St. Augustine presented what has been accepted as the more orthodox view, is that the church is actually, in this life and in this world, a mixed bag, that none of us have that X-ray machine. St. Augustine didn't say this, but none of us have the X-ray machine like they had on the Grinch that stole Christmas that could analyze the state of somebody's spiritual heart and see whether it's three sizes too small or not. We don't have that kind of technology, even in our day with AI, but they didn't have it in St. Augustine's day either. And so, what St. Augustine, building on the teaching of Jesus is that the church, the people of God are like wheat and tares. You have to let the two of them grow up together, because if you try to separate them out, you might destroy the good wheat, thinking that it's a weed.

And it's like a net that goes out and you catch all the fish that you catch, but some of them are going to be bad fish, and yet you can't separate it out by you casting the net.

And so, the harvest, the sorting, that has to take place at the end of the age. And one of the promises of our Scriptures was, "It will happen. There will come a day when the church will be that pure spotless bride that comes down out of heaven and is presented to Jesus with all of her glory and no taints, no sins, no suffering, no pain, nothing of defilement."

But in this day, Augustine argued, we have to accept the good with the bad. And so, he gave this idea that the church is, "It has an invisible quality and a visible quality. And the invisible quality is that there is a true church. There are those who are truly chosen and truly called, who are the authentic true believers, those who have been filled with the Spirit of God and believe in their heart of hearts that Jesus is Lord.

But what we see is the visible church, and that is mixed with some wolves in sheep's clothing and some people that are not yet believers and maybe some who have fallen away but may come back. And then outside of the church, you might actually have some people that believe in Jesus too and are living the life.

And so, there is sort of this concentric circles, like a Venn diagram, where the two circles are coming together and they overlap, but they're not a one-to-one thing, the visible and the invisible church.

And this is the state of affairs in our life. It's why we say, "This is the church militant, and what will come is the church triumphant."

And so, today we are called and we're commissioned to be a people that brings praises to the Lord. And the true church, the authentic church, doesn't just receive their calling from God as a privilege or a distinction, but receives the calling of God as a commission to be about the work of taking that which is invisible, "this is our job," and making it visible.

Our job is to take that which has been entrusted to us as true believers, saints of God, and live the authentic confession of Jesus and live the life of faith manifest by the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, to take the invisible and make it visible to the praise of the Lord. And this brings us to the last point, which is, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit." He says, "In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, believed in Jesus, you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." Today we're actually going to be doing that tangibly, we're making visible that which is invisible here with baby Ella, who is going to be baptized. And one of the things that I will be saying is that you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ and forever. There's actually two sacramental signs that are part of this today. The water, which is our rebirth and our cleansing. There are so many symbols with water of a new exodus saved in the flood. There are all kinds of imagery with the water, but the water is an outward and visible sign of our regeneration, our rebirth into Jesus. Ella is by faith becoming a saint today. Isn't that cool?

And then I will put the anointing oil, which is sometimes called chrism, on her forehead in the sign of the cross with those words, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ and forever."

It's where we get our word Christ.

Christ means the anointed one. And those of us who are in Christ are also anointed with Him. That's why you are called a Christian.

If you are a believer in Jesus and you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit of the living God and the outward and visible manifestation of that would be what we're doing here in the life of the institutional church, you are called to make the invisible visible, to live that sacramental life of one who is called to be a saint commissioned to bring God's glory into this world and sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ and forever. So let me invite Ella and her family to come up.