

“There Are Saints in Stained Glass, but the Best Are in the Pews”

November 1, 2020 – All Saints Day
Hamilton Presbyterian Church

The Prayer for Understanding:

Open my eyes that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in our hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set us free.
 Silently now we wait for Thee,
 Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
 Open our eyes, illumine me,
Spirit Divine!

The Witness of the Scripture:

The Gospel: Luke 19:1-10

The Sermon:

There was a rather amazing article in the New York Times. Let me share it:

“On a recent foggy morning, Brandon Woolf was sitting on a folding chair, in front of a folding table, next to a Brooklyn mailbox. He was writing letters on a 1940s-vintage portable Royal typewriter. In front of him, a chalkboard sign explained to those passing-by: “Free Letters for Friends Feeling Blue.”

“Mr. Woolf, doesn’t work for the post office; in fact he’s full-time faculty at New York University.

On the day this reporter was present, Cole Page Whipps stopped by with his mother. Cole, who is 6 years old, decided to write a letter to his grandfather, who is in the hospital. “What would you like to say to Grandpa?” Mr. Woolf asked Cole, who was seated on a red stool six feet away.

“Hi, Grandpa, I hope you feel better,” he said.

“That’s a great start,” replied Mr. Woolf. With a hunt and peck at the keyboard, he exercised some editorial license and added: “You can do it. I love you.”

Mr. Woolf then asked about Cole's favorite subject in school (math) and what he likes to do with Grandpa (play math games). Then he helped with the phrasing: "This week in school I learned a new game. It's a math game. I like the game because I like math, and I know you like math, too."

A picture shows young Cole dropping his letter into the box.

Weather permitting Mr. Woolf comes out for two-hour intervals several times per week. He said he gets at least one taker every time he's at the mailbox, and sometimes there has been a socially distanced line. He estimated he had written more than 50 letters, each of them unique.

II.

I have no idea of Professor Woolf's beliefs, the article is mum on his religious persuasion. But I think Dr. Woolf is one of God's saints.

Is he a stained glass window saint? Will there ever be a church named for him on Harford Road? Quite unlikely.

He is a "pew saint" or in this case, a "sidewalk saint." He is one of those people too numerous to number who are in ministry, bringing hope and healing to folks. A stained glass saint, he is not, but on the sidewalk he excels.

He is what I call a Matthew 25 saint. "If you do it unto one of the least of these my brethren," Jesus says, "you do it unto me."

Protestants have a different understanding of saint. In truth, if I may brashly say it, we have the New Testament understanding. The saints of the New Testament were the every day crew, those in the church who worshiped, worked, those active in their faith. New Testament saints were precisely like you and me, a full and complex mixture, as unique as each of us is different.

So while the ghosts and goblins played last night, on All Saints Sunday, we acknowledge that we are all, all of us, members of a great extended family. Our family tree, which is the family tree of the people of God, includes seekers and servants, poets and prophets, mystics and medics, lawyers and lovers, contemplatives and charismatics.

We've been grafted into a family that seeks to live – sometimes with success, sometimes not – with God's priorities, with God's dream; a family that depends on grace, relies on mercy; a family striving toward Kingdom values. God chooses us, claims us, invites us to be a lantern through which God's light can shine, even when our lights may flicker at times, or even fail as the winds howl around us.

III.

Our Gospel story helps complete this picture. The location is Jericho, a good-sized town along the Jerusalem road.

Zacchaeus lives there. Now it is critical to remember this man is short, ... not just in physical stature, but more so in terms of his moral standing among his neighbors; frankly, they despised him.

That he was Rome's tax-collector made him the richest man in town. And did he flaunt it! The little guy with a complex who swaggers down the street.

Word gets around Jesus will be passing through. Luke does not say why, but Zacchaeus seems to have a compulsion to see him. Standing barely five feet tall and the least popular man in Jericho, no one will budge to accommodate him. He shinnies up a sycamore tree and that's where Jesus spots him, peaking out between the leaves.

"Zacchaeus," Jesus says, "Get out of that tree! I'm spending tonight with YOU."

Well, Jericho is snickering up their sleeves thinking Jesus has lost his senses. Inviting himself to the house of a man nobody would touch with a ten-foot pole.

So crazy is this that even Zacchaeus is taken back. In The Message, Peterson translates it: "Zacchaeus just stood there, stunned. He stammered apologetically."

Luke swiftly moves the action. Before he has a chance to change his mind, Zacchaeus finds himself promising not only to turn over fifty percent of his holdings to the poor, but to pay back, four to one, all he'd extorted from his neighbors.

While the townsfolk were astonished, Luke tells us Jesus was absolutely delighted. "Today salvation has come to this house," he said.

So here is a sawed-off social disaster with a big bank account, doing crooked work, being welcomed by Jesus into this saintly fellowship we celebrate today.

IV.

In a way, Zacchaeus can stand for all of us. Saints are everyday folk through whom light is shining. The person sitting next to us? they just may be a saint.

Today, we remember the bonds – reaching through the years, beyond the grave – holding together this family. We carry their names in our hearts, don't we? Each one is a story worth telling, a tale worth sharing. Each one a blessed memory.

The number is untold: these saints who are part of this enterprise we call the Christian Faith, these saints in "a great cloud of witnesses."

They are saying to us: "Don't be a backbench Christian. Let your discipleship have lived consequences that impact the world for good. Be a people through whom God's light shines in a peculiar and helpful way."

That's the challenge for Hamilton Presbyterian Church.