

Sermon: What Do You Hear?
Text: Ephesians 1:15-23
Date: November 7, 2010
Context: WWPCCC
All Saints Sunday
By: Rev. Steve Runholt

*I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
and your love toward all the saints.*

Ephesians 1:15

I'm not sure this qualifies as a statement of faith, but I believe that dreams really can come true. I say this, I know this, because one of mine did just last week.

A few weeks ago a friend told me that Barbara Brown Taylor was co-hosting a small continuing education event at Columbia Seminary. Ms. Taylor was teaming up with David Bartlett, a professor of NT at Columbia, to do a two-day conference centered around the theme of Preaching Advent.

A dream come true. I signed up immediately. Of course that pairing of Ms. Taylor and Mr. Bartlett was attraction enough, but the format of the conference was also intriguing.

The idea was to look at the given lectionary texts for each of the four Sundays in Advent; and then to consider—bear with me for a second—their theological and pastoral dimensions, along with their exegetical context, all in service of mining their homiletical potential.

Mercifully, Ms. Taylor did not stick to that script. Instead she held a more or less impromptu workshop on sermon writing itself. She shared with the attendees a helpful technique she uses when she's writing her sermons. And it's one I want to share with you today.

The technique works best when you're dealing with highly abstract concepts – redemption, say – or when you're confronted with a highly abstract passage, all exposition and no story, which is to say almost any passage from Paul's epistles, including the one we read just a moment ago.

So here's the exercise she did with us. She asked us to imagine that she was holding up a web. She would then say a word, and our job was to toss into the web whatever words came to our minds.

The idea was try to bring these highly abstract concepts down to earth. To describe them with specific, concrete words, grounded in examples and experiences that we've had in our daily lives.

“So,” she began, “when I say ‘righteousness’ what do you think of?”

“I think of clean sheets drying on a clothesline in the bright warm sun,” one of the students replied.

“Perfect!” Ms. Taylor exclaimed. “What else?”

“I think of freshly baked bread,” offered another student.

“Oh, that's wonderful! Why do you think of freshly baked bread when I say ‘righteousness’?”

“Because there's a sweet older lady in my church who bakes a fresh loaf of bread for our communion service. And that warm, wonderful smell fills the whole church. And she is the most righteous woman I know.”

“Preach that,” Ms. Taylor admonished him.

And now it's your turn. Imagine I'm holding up a web. I'm going to say a word and I'd love for you to just go ahead and say what the word makes you think of.

The word is inevitably going to bring to mind people and names. But don't stop there. It might also bring to mind a special place. Or even a sound or a smell, like the smell of freshly baked bread.

These associations don't have to be positive, mind you. They just have to come from your own life.

Ready? When I say "saint" what do you think of?

For me, one word that always comes to mind when I think of the word "saint" is "Catholic." It has a sort of foreign sound to it, like déjà vu or Chardonnay. I think that's why so many Protestant folks don't actually like the word. And why we so often get it wrong when we do use it.

Earlier this week I heard someone say in a public lecture that a saint is someone whose story God is telling.

As intriguing as that definition sounds, I'll confess that I couldn't disagree more. A saint is not someone whose story God is telling. Quite the reverse. A saint is someone whose life is telling God's story, someone through whom we catch a glimpse of what God is like and of what we are called to be and to do in response.

Which is why we make a point of observing this day, a day to look back and remember our foremothers and forefathers in the faith, those people whose lives helped tell God's story, and helped us understand what we are called to be and to do in response.

In some cases these people will be our figurative ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph. But in some cases these saints will be our literal foremothers and forefathers.

Your grandfather Eli who traveled the Methodist preaching circuit, and tended to the spiritual well being of the residents of Wabash County and never once complained about the long hours or the hard travel.

Your Aunt Lucy who challenged the school board in Raleigh NC to integrate its buses and classrooms, and who didn't back down even when angry people started throwing rocks through her windows in opposition.

Your mother who read Bible stories to you when you were little, and then who showed you what those stories mean when you later got arrested for vandalizing the high school and she came down to the police station and paid your bail and gave you a big hug when you were released and you cried with the relief her grace and forgiveness bestowed on you.

Or your son who drove all the way down from Connecticut and to sit with you while your wife and his mother took her last breaths.

Or your wife who puts up with you, and makes you coffee every single morning and smiles when she puts it down beside you and kisses you on your increasingly shiny head.

So this day, All Saints Sunday on our calendar, can and does have a personal dimension, but it also can and does have an institutional dimension.

This month marks the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church. It wasn't called that – we weren't called that – way back in the beginning. On November 22nd, 1925, 61 persons were received as charter members of the Farm School Presbyterian Church.

We will celebrate this long heritage of faithfulness more fully and more specifically in two weeks, on November 21st, during our annual Harvest Celebration and Thanksgiving Service.

But it's fitting that we should mark the beginning of this anniversary month on this particular day. For we are standing on the shoulders of giants here this morning, generations of women and men whose lives gave those around them a glimpse of what God is like and of what we are called to be and to do in response.

You don't have to be around here long to have heard these names: Ohler, Bannerman, Jensen, Devries, Holden, Laursen, Deschamps. The list goes on and on. Their stories are well documented in a new book which Beverly Ohler has compiled and edited called, *They Faithfully Led the Way*, which I commend to you.

These women and men weren't perfect. For example, I've been told many times that Fred would sometimes slip out of the service after he'd finished preaching to grab a quick smoke.

But being a saint isn't about being perfect. It's about living a life that sheds light on what God is like, and on what we are called to be and to do in response.

And it's about doing that in specific, concrete ways. As Lisa Ohler wrote on the back cover of her mom's book, and I'm paraphrasing slightly, these people used their arms and legs, their brains and their hearts, to make their lofty ideals (and their faith) real. Grounded. In the dirt. On the earth. On a daily basis.

What words, what concrete, specific words, what words grounded in real life, do you think of when you hear the word "saint?"

Another word I think of is "servant." I think of the saints Paul was referring to here in his letter to the Ephesians. The members of that church community who signed up to cook meals for the Emmaus group at the University of Ephesus.

The members who volunteered to help host the ladies from *No Place to Stay*, the traveling women's shelter in town.

The ones who committed to come every Wednesday night to choir practice, or the faithful members who signed up to serve as ushers and liturgists, so as to help lead worship on Sunday morning at the First Presbyterian Church of Ephesus.

The ones who took another step up and volunteered to serve on the communications committee, say, in order to help get the word out about what was happening at church.

Or on the Christian Ed committee, or the Social Outreach Committee.

Of those who took still another step up to serve as *presbeteroi* (i.e., elders) on the church governing board. I think they called it Session back then. An important job. A big commitment.

What words, what concrete, specific words, what words grounded in real life, do you think of when you hear the word "saint?"

The final word that comes to mind when I think of the word “saint” is “departed.” I think of those dear friends and family members and church members who have gone before us, who gave us a glimpse in their living and in their dying of what God is like, and of what we are called to be and do in response.

And whose lives we now remember....