

I never thought of myself as an especially saintly person and — spoiler alert — I still don't. Well into adulthood, I thought of saints like superheroes, exciting figures who did great things because of exceptional abilities, and all the more appealing because they asked nothing of the rest of us, presented no challenges, no conflict.

But then I learned that the writers of the New Testament used the word "saint," or rather the Greek word "hagios," to refer to all the people who had chosen to accept the free gift of Christ's love and become his followers. The word means "set apart." In those days, most saints were very much alive and walking the Earth. Saints were also a small minority, for Christians were a small minority who had quite visibly set themselves apart from society by their acts of compassion and their proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. But they were also ordinary people, set apart by God's extraordinary grace, not their own greatness. They probably didn't feel especially "saintly" either.

For the writers of the New Testament, saints really were just folk like them, folk who had set their hope on Christ and lived for the praise of his glory. They were not idealized, for their personal faults and shortcomings were very much in evidence. They struggled to keep Christ at the center of their lives and to follow his difficult teachings. They weren't saints because they always did the right thing, or because they had all the answers, or because they were always sweet and pleasant. They were saints because their relationships with Jesus Christ were so open and intimate as to let his love transform them.

Would the saints of the early Church recognize us as saints? Do we even want to be saints? Sainthood has its downsides. Side effects may include martyrdom. But even apart from those extreme cases, sainthood still entails a certain separation from society, especially these days as society grows ever more secular and fractious. Jesus explained that even though he loved the world, and was saving the world, his way was opposed to the way of the world, for, while the world rewards those who are most divisive, Jesus blesses peacemakers. The world acclaims the rich and seemingly happy, while Jesus blesses the poor and suffering. That we can choose which side we're on is a blessing itself; even if we're doing well, we can still be on Jesus's side. He tells us how, with a "Blessed" just for us: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man."

Being on Jesus's side means joining his mission, accepting his mission as our own. That is the answer to the skeptics of the world who might fairly ask, just how is it that the poor, the hungry, and the weeping are blessed? How does Jesus bless them? The answer, I hope, is that Jesus blesses them... through us. Jesus asks us to identify with those who suffer, to see ourselves in their place and consider how we would want others to treat us. Would we want to be ignored, ridiculed, or lectured, or would we want to be welcomed, fed, and consoled? Would we see the face of Christ reflected in the faces of the saints?

I think we would, if we were blessed to come to Advent. This church has chosen

to keep Christ's mission at the core of our identity. The only way to do that, of course, is to actually serve those in need, and so we do, giving generously of our time, effort, and money to meet the needs of the most vulnerable members of our society. Our school, our personal kindness, our chili collecting for ECHO, our partnerships with Grace Mission, Safe Families for Children and others, the discretionary fund, Episcopal Church Women, our support of our partner parish La Trinidad in Los Arabos, Cuba, and the work done on our behalf at the diocesan, national, and international levels all reveal the truth of Christ's love, his gracious compassion, and the immeasurable greatness of his power. We are, above all, a church of the mission of Jesus Christ, and the saints of the early Church would recognize us as their siblings as well as their successors.

But think about those saints for a moment. They show us that anyone can be a saint because God's grace is pervasive and proactive. Saints are proactive too — sometimes proactive in being contemplative — but always proactive in deliberately choosing first to accept God's grace, and then to respond to that grace with their own. Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, to be a disciple, and an evangelist. Saul, a zealous persecutor of Christians, became St. Paul through God's intervention. If God can get wonderful things out of terrible people — and remember that God used notoriously cruel Roman executioners, who were also pagans, to carry out the holiest sacrifice ever — if God can use the likes of them to bring grace to the world, what can God do with the likes of us, who are good and striving to be better?

Now think of the saints we have here at Advent. I won't name names because we are so richly blessed with God's grace and human responses to God's grace that if I were to try to cite a few examples, it would mean leaving out dozens of others who were equally worthy, and that's... astonishing to consider. Some of the Saints of Advent have much money and give generously. Some have much time and give generously. Some have much of both and give generously of both. Some who don't but give sacrificially of what they do have. That we have so many people who are so generous in so many ways isn't a coincidence, and it's not because anyone ever imposed stringent requirements as a condition of membership here.

This church deliberately doesn't work the way the rest of the world does. We don't demand dues. We don't issue membership cards. We don't have barriers, we have blessings. We choose, rather, to trust that God will bless us, and to trust each other to respond by sharing our blessings. Think for a moment how near God is to this place. Take a moment — no, wait take three moments — one to feel God's presence, one to thank God for doing so much for us, and one to ask God what the best way to respond would be for you.