

**Matthew 5:1-12** When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. We name all those saints of this parish who went to their reward in the past year. God bless them all – we do miss them!

We religious people tend to toss around the word “saint” and assume we all know what it means – after all, aren’t many of our churches named after saints? – but perhaps it might be a good thing to take a closer look at all things saintly, and reflect upon what it means for us today.

Ummm, wait a minute. Us? Today? Saints? Aren’t saints all those people who died gruesome deaths for their faith, or who did amazing and wonderful things, or who changed the world?

Of course. Say the word “saint” and we automatically think of the big-name saints, the apostles, people like St Francis of Assisi, St Gregory the Great, St Perpetua..you’ve never heard of Perpetua? One of the early martyrs? Ah, she’s a fascinating saint, a wealthy Roman noblewoman who became a Christian. It took the Romans three tries to actually kill her off. Now that’s a saint! What about St. Giles, a hermit after whom we named our program for children who are special? He was so antisocial that he lived alone with only a talking red deer for company. All he wanted to do was pray. Different, but sure, I’ll say that’s a saint.

Yes, there’s a Hollywood view of saints that sticks in our heads, these larger than life people who are so unlike us, but there is also a deeper and truer understanding of sainthood if we look a little bit harder.

First let’s look at the word “saint.” It comes from the Latin *sanctus* or holy. Okay, a saint is someone who is holy. And then we have St Paul, who talks about saints in the Letter to the Romans. As a matter of fact, when he sends one of his letters to the followers of Christ in Rome, he calls them “saints.” Does this mean that they all are already holy? Have they completed their spiritual journey and thus become a final product of sorts? In fact, Paul’s Greek word, *hagios*, is usually translated as “saint” but also seems to mean anyone who is one of God’s people, not of the world, but of God. These Romans to whom he writes are not a finished product but people on the path to a closer and closer communion with God.

That’s a relief to me. I hear the word “saint” and my usual reaction is that saints are those big name holy people, the ones with churches named after them. I have a hard time imagining myself as that kind of holy person, all bright and shiny with a golden halo and little cherubs swooping around me. No, that’s definitely not me.

But I can imagine myself as a person on the path to a closer relationship with God. Someone who is trying, day by day, to be better, to please my Lord, to make my small corner of the world a better place.

And that's where today's Gospel is so very helpful.

Now it's very early in Jesus' active ministry. He's just called the first apostles to join him in the work. He has begun teaching and preaching and healing people, and he has attracted quite a lot of curious people who want to find out what this miracle worker is about. And now they have come from all around, not just the immediate area, but from some of the Gentile territories as well. They want to hear what he has to say.

He goes a little way up a mountain so all of the crowd can see and hear him, and he begins to teach. And what he teaches – it is contrary to what most people expect: he tells them that it isn't the big fancy priests in the temple who pray so loudly and pompously that are given God's favor, it's the lowly people. The ones like them, who struggle and suffer and try and don't get much earthly reward. They are the blessed ones, the Greek word is *makarioi*, the recipients of God's favor, but we could also say they are the holy ones, the ones who are, in a word, saints.

Jesus lays out ways in which people can be *makarioi*, blessed, beloved of God. But there is one thing that is missing from this list of things that earns God's favor, that gives them the guidelines for saintliness.

Nowhere in the list of the Beatitudes does Jesus say, "Blessed are the perfect."

Nowhere.

And that's what gives me hope that I can be a saint, too.

Because God knows I'm not perfect. Jesus teaches about these qualities that edge us down the road toward sainthood because he knows we are not perfect. He knows that at any given time in our lives we may be able to follow one or two, or on a really good day, maybe three of these guidelines, but he doesn't expect that we will do all of them. Only he was able to reach that standard.

Okay, I will accept that it is possible for me to be a saint. But why would I strive for sainthood? Why would any of us strive for such an exalted state, knowing that we cannot achieve perfection?

One clue might be in our own brains. We seem to be wired to believe in God. Recent studies by the neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran yielded results which led him, an atheist, to say " [my result] seems to imply there is neural circuitry whose activity is conducive to religious belief. It's not that we have some God module in our brains, but we may have specialised circuits for belief."<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that an atheist would reduce his findings to scientific process or firing neurons rather than faith. If, however, we look to scientists who are believers for further explication, the idea of being wired to believe gets even more traction. We might get a more sensitive and satisfying view of our desire to believe and to be at one with the divine from the great early psychologist and philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2005/feb/24/1>

William James, who noted that science might not be the best tool with which to examine faith or religious belief. His view about the relationship between humanity and the divine might best be summed up by his observation in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that “there is something wrong in us as we naturally stand” – in other words, we are imperfect beings – and that “we are saved from that wrongness by making proper connections with the higher powers.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, James affirms what Jesus was teaching. There is a way of being better people, following the divine more perfectly, of being *makarios*, saintly, blessed...and to get there, there is a process to follow, a way of living that is often counter to what the world teaches.

We strive to be better, as James has observed, because our very hearts and minds yearn toward God, yearn to be more worthy, and to do that, we need to live our lives in a particular way.

That way of living, that is the way of the saints, and of those of us who aspire to a glimmer of sainthood in our own souls. And that is a way of living that we actually can recognize, if we think of the good souls whom we have sent on home to God in the past year. They took that journey down that countercultural path long ago, whether it was George Fore’s deep and rich life of prayer and study and service, Nadine and Alex Mickel’s warm gift of hospitality, Pete Whitlock’s insistence that he would repair everything including the kitchen sink around here, because no job was menial or unimportant when it came to serving God. They were saints. Not capital-S saints who had churches named after them, but the great cloud of witnesses, the group of believers sitting at the foot of the mountain listening to Jesus teach, the disciples in Rome hoping that St Paul would get to visit them soon. Saints, holy ones, blessed and recipients of God’s favor because of how they chose to live their lives, in a way that makes sense to us, but not to the rest of the world.

So the lesson we learn from Jesus and the lesson that we learned from all of these Epiphany saints is that each one of us has it in us to be a saint. We don’t have to be martyred like Perpetua or Peter, we don’t have to be a pope like Gregory, we don’t even have to be a hermit like Giles. We simply have to follow the roadmap to a different way of life, step on that path and keep on walking it. That is how God calls each and every one of us to sainthood, and trusts that each and every one of us can be saints.

And if you doubt it, here’s some encouragement from an unlikely source, another person whom we lost this past year, who might not make anyone’s list for sainthood but might have it more right than some of us religious folks...a few parting words from Steve Jobs:

“Here’s to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently -- they’re not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can’t do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William James, *Writings 1902-1910*, New York: The Library of America, 1987

<sup>3</sup> “Think Different” Apple Marketing Campaign, 1997

Can we be crazy enough to believe that we too can be saints? Jesus thought so, St Paul thought so, and Steve Jobs in his own unique way though so. Who are you to argue?

Amen.

The best argument I know for an immortal life is the existence of a man who deserves one.

[William James](#)