

Saints in Training

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Mark 12:28-34

People who study communication tell us that Americans are bombarded with more than 3000 commercial messages every single day. Add to that all the other messages in the form of instructions, admonitions, conversations, and so on that vie for our attention, and trying to sort out the truly important stuff is as difficult as trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose.

Maybe we can empathize with the scholar in the gospel story. He asks Jesus to tell him which of the 613 commandments in the Torah is the single most important one. Like us, he needs help sorting through so much teaching and boiling it down to essentials.

Jesus willingly gives him an answer. As Eugene Peterson paraphrases it in *The Message*, Jesus says:

The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these (Mark 12:29-31).

Another way to put it is that relationship makes sense of everything else in the world—relationship with God and relationship with neighbor. If we focus our energy on those two things, everything else falls into place.

The way Jesus delivers this simple word reinforces the message. Jesus doesn't have email, FaceBook, or a cell phone. He teaches face-to-face, through dialogue—in other words, through direct one-to-one relationship. The truth of his words grabs hold of us and takes root in our hearts because this teacher doesn't just *speak* the truth; he *does* the truth.

Doing the truth is by far the best way to teach and influence other people. Those of you who teach know that the most effective way to convey anything you want to get across is by example.

Long ago, Benjamin Franklin wanted to persuade the residents of Philadelphia that lighting the streets at night would make their city safer and friendlier. Franklin published a newspaper and had other means of persuasion at his disposal, but he didn't use any of those resources. Instead, he simply hung a single lighted globe outside his own home each evening. And before long, other householders began to copy his example. They hung lights outside their homes, and the streets of the old city of Philadelphia became safe and well lighted after dark.

Human beings learn some useful things through precept, but the kind of deep learning that shapes lives comes through the example of another life.

The examples and relationships that make us who we are brings us to the subject of those we call the saints of the church. Most of us are here in church today because of the influence of someone who was a Christian—a friend, perhaps, or a parent or a teacher. For example, I'm here mostly because of my mother, who started reading the Bible to me when I was still in my crib, and who has always modeled selfless devotion to God and neighbor. All Saints' Day is a time to remember and honor our mentors and teachers and role models in the faith—all the people whose lives taught us that following Jesus is a real and dynamic way to live, not just a set of scripture verses.

I'm going to stop talking for a moment and invite you to call up in your memory some people whose example shaped your life—your saints. Let their faces come into view and say their names, either silently or aloud.

These people who taught you that God is love and how to love others are your saints. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters bestow sainthood on certain exemplary people after they're dead. We Protestants take a different approach, following Paul's idea that saints are *all whom God justifies through*

grace by faith. In other words, sainthood is the common calling of all who are baptized. By that definition, all of us are saints-in-the-making. As the children's hymn says,
The saints are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one, too.

Maybe you don't think of yourself as saint material. But it never has been a requirement that saints be perfect. As the poet Phyllis McGinley says:
The wonderful thing about saints is that they were human. They lost their tempers, got hungry, scolded God, were egotistical or testy, made mistakes and regretted them, still they went on doggedly blundering toward heaven.

Being a saint, as Barbara Brown Taylor explains it, means first and foremost belonging to God. As our text from Mark's gospel reminds us, love God and the rest falls into place.

Being a saint doesn't mean that you have to be self-righteously good—you can be funny and full of joy and appreciate humor and laughter. It doesn't mean that you have to be pious or dull, but that you live with immense gratitude for God's surprising abundance.

Being a saint means living in hope, never giving in to despair.
It means practicing forgiveness and forgoing cynical judgments about the world, others or yourself.
It means lifting up rather than tearing apart.
It means living into what is just and good and holy by putting one foot in front of the other every day, every week, every year of your life.

To be a saint, you just have to be *you*, the remarkable and amazing human being God made from love, to love as you are loved.

That's all, and it's enough.

Thanks be to God. Amen.