

Why Don't We Believe in Saints?©

Colossians 1:1-10

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Today is the last of the 5-week sermon series on the faith questions you had written down. This last question was “why don't we believe in the saints?”

And my answer is ... well, we do! We most certainly do believe in saints.

So often, in our worship, we say together an affirmation of what we believe, and in that declaration of faith – The Apostles' Creed – we state we believe in the holy catholic church and in the communion of the saints. Most of us know that the catholic church we are referring to is the complete, universal church ... the church worldwide. When we talk about the church, we mean the Body of Christ, those who believe in and follow Jesus – those living as well as those who have passed on to the eternal life.

But are we as clear about who the saints are? We say things like “I can't help it. I'm no saint!” when we are making excuses for not being perfect or for making a mistake. We sing the song, “When the saints go marching in ... oh Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in!”

What saints are we singing about?

We often think of people like Saint Francis of Assisi, who gave up a life of wealth and possessions to live a life of poverty, caring for and about nature and focusing on peace and love. Or most recently, we have in mind Mother Teresa, who has been made a saint in the Roman Catholic Church because of her dedicated, selfless work with the poor.

But, we also think of other Christians who worked diligently to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, who were persecuted and killed because of their perseverance. St. Paul and other disciples were among them, but there have been many others, over the years. Deitrich Bonhoffer comes to mind, a German pastor, was put to death because of his faith and his beliefs, during the Holocaust.

When I was in Pennsylvania, doing some family genealogy, I found a book with pictures, sketches drawn of men and women who were killed because of their faith. One that will forever stand out in my mind was Annika DeHaven, a young woman who was a devout Mennonite, being buried alive. Many of the DeHaven's came to America because of religious persecution. I imagine most of you have the same story in some of your family history.

I know that the question – why don't we believe in saints – was referring to the patron saints in the Roman Catholic Church. They have been given a place of high honor because of their devout faith and dedication; many were martyrs, persecuted, killed; many wrote spiritual books, worked and lived in poverty for the sake of the gospel and the poor ones Jesus loves.

There is a saint for the day on every day of the year. There are prayers to the saints; there are saints for different purposes. Joseph is the saint who helps sell your house. You buy a little statue of him and say a prayer for help to him, bury him upside down in the yard and he, supposedly will help your house sell.

There is a saint to pray to when you have misplaced something or you're looking for something – like a parking space.

These saints surround us and watch over us, helping us through our lives. According to the Roman Catholics.

So – do we believe in them? Well, I do. They were and are believers who did unusually brave and faithful things for Jesus. I personally think it is a good thing to remember people like that; to respect them and show them honor.

But, the difference comes for those of us who are in the reformed tradition – that is protestants who broke away from the Roman Catholic Church over several things – the reformers said we should not pray to anyone but God. To pray to the saints has a feeling of having many gods. I do believe those in the Catholic tradition would probably say that is not true, that they only worship one God but they do talk to and lean on the saints for help – they are the ones that have finished their race and gone on to cheer us on in life.

But, let's look at Paul's letter to the Colossians. Notice how he addresses the church in Colossae. "To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ ..."

And goes on to say how he has heard of their faith and the love they have for the saints – who are those who are working hard to spread the gospel.

The thing is, Paul wrote his letters (and several address the congregations as "saints," long before the Roman Catholic Church started venerating saints.

In other words, Paul is saying that those believers in the church are saints. In fact, all who are "in Christ," whether living or who have died, are saints.

And that means you, if you are a believer, a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. And of course, if you are, then you model your life after him – caring for the poor, the sick, those in prison, helping those who don't know the love and mercy of God through his Son Jesus to come to understand and believe.

If you are a believer, you are a saint. If your loved one was a believer in Jesus Christ, and has died, they are also a saint.

Actually, I read that the Roman Catholics believe this too. At least, they believe that all who have died are saints. They just elevate some who lived unusually devout lives to a higher honor as a saint.

Remember how Paul says in Hebrews 12:1-3 that there is a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on, helping us to persevere and run the race of faith? Those are the saints – I believe they are all the saints cheering us on and helping us to stay on course.

So, why don't we believe in the saints? We absolutely do believe. I believe in you; in your dedication, your perseverance, your commitment, your love for Christ and for all the saints – his followers.

I invite you to do something right now as we come to the end of this sermon. Turn to the person on your right and shake their hand and call them by name only say "I'm thankful for you, Saint ...". Now turn to your left and do the same thing. Shake that person's hand, and tell them "I'm thankful for you, Saint ...". Be sincere. Take it in.

I'm thankful for all of you, saints of the Church. Amen.

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