

St. Vincent

Psalm 139:1-6, 1 Peter 2:9-10

Throughout Lent, we have been on a journey together learning about the holiness of God. Today, we will take a little bit of a right-hand turn to talk about the holiness of us, God's people, the saints, as we are called in scripture, as we reflect God's holiness to the world. Our scripture for this morning is twofold – from the Old Testament - Psalm 139:1-6 and from the New Testament - 1 Peter 2:9-10. Please listen for the word of the Lord.

Read scripture and pray.

I was watching a movie a few weeks ago at my house called St. Vincent, starring Bill Murray of Saturday Night Live fame, one of the original Ghost Busters. You all know Bill Murray, so I'd like you right now to take a second and picture Bill Murray in your head. (Picture at 943). We've all seen him before, and in this movie, he looked just like the picture you have of him in your head right now – rough looking, ruffled, unkempt, a little beer belly, clothes that don't match, and maybe a little hung over. This is classic Bill Murray. In this film, Bill Murray looked just like this and he had a personality to match. He was the cranky neighbor, the guy who drives the beat up car, the guy who doesn't keep his yard very nice, the guy who yells at kids, the guy who doesn't say hello and the guy complains about everyone else's behavior. We've all known a guy like this at some point in our lives, he could be a neighbor, he could be a family member or maybe we are that guy. This was Vincent. This was the exterior that everyone saw.

But Vincent's young neighbor, Oliver, sees Vincent differently. Even though Vincent was rough on the outside, if you really knew him, if you really looked beyond the gruff exterior, if you really saw his heart, you would agree with Oliver that there is just a little bit of **holiness** inside that tough outer shell.

The pivotal scene in the movie is when Oliver has to do a project for his Catholic school, describing someone he knows who fits the definition of a saint. Most kids describe their mom, their grandma or maybe Mother Teresa, but Oliver describes his crotchety neighbor, Vincent.

Oliver stands up in front of his entire class, kids, parents, nuns and priests, and he tells them all how Vincent is a saint. (Play video at 943). Oliver recounts Vincent's military career in Vietnam when he personally carried two of his wounded comrades who were pinned down by enemy fire to safety. He talks about Vincent's wife of many years who is in a home for dementia patients. Vincent visits her every day even though she doesn't even recognize him and he always takes her laundry home to wash it even though the facility would gladly do it for him. Vincent has a cat whom he makes sure to feed first even when Vincent has very little for dinner. Vincent takes in a pregnant, unwed woman who has nowhere else to live and allows her to stay and raise her baby in his home.

And most of all, Vincent takes care of Oliver, a fatherless boy who moves in next door and has no one to take care of him while his mom is at work. Oliver just shows up on his doorstep one day (frightened and locked out of his house), and while he could turn Oliver away, he shows him kindness instead. Without Vincent, Oliver would be at home alone for hours each day, eating dinner long after his belly started growling, and navigating the cruel world of bullies alone. Without Vincent, Oliver would have to take public buses to and from school every day, but Vincent agrees to pick him up at the door. Oliver and Vincent develop a bond and a friendship that transcends their age gap, their differing interests and Vincent's severe grumpiness. Vincent shows that he is a selfless, devoted and caring person – all of the qualities needed in being a saint. Young Oliver sees this and points it out to everyone, including the adults who have written him off. Thus, he is dubbed St. Vincent.

What is a saint? In the Catholic Church, a saint is an official title given to only a few individuals who meet specific criteria that includes leading a life of exceptional holiness and virtue and completing verifiable miracles. No one becomes a saint until they die and are officially canonized by the church. Saints are venerated and prayed to by living Catholics. Saints of this sort are Mother Teresa of Calcutta, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Paul of the New Testament. **All very holy people to be sure.**

In scripture, however, the word saint, or "hagios" in the Greek is used to describe all people who are part of the church universal and are consecrated to God through Jesus Christ. "Hagios" literally means "holy" and is the exact same word

used to describe the holiness of God. The exact same word. A holy God and a holy people. God extends to us the invitation to be like Him, to be holy, “a holy nation, God’s own people,” as our scripture for today says.

Belief in Christ is the key, and such belief is shown to the world through one’s selflessness, caring and devotion to God and to God’s people. The saints are the body of Christ. Christians are saints by virtue of their connection with Jesus. Christians are called to be saints and to live their daily lives to more closely match their position in Christ. This is the biblical description and the calling of the saints.

The question raised by the movie St. Vincent that I described to you a few minutes ago, is: Who is holy? Who is a saint? How is such a thing determined? Is it determined by a group of human beings? Or is it determined by the one who is himself holy? Let’s look to scripture for an answer to this perplexing question.

Our scripture reading for today from the Old Testament lends us some guidance to this question. Psalm 139, is a well known, fascinating psalm about how well God knows each and every one of us. There are many more verses than just the ones I read today, but even in verses 1-6, the psalmist makes it abundantly clear that God know us very well.

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from far away. . . . Even before a word is on my tongue . . . you know it completely.”

Clearly, the psalmist is saying that God knows us inside and out. He knows our thoughts, he knows our words, even before we say them. Often in the Presbyterian faith, we use this psalm to focus on the bad in us, saying that God knows our sin and we cannot hide it from him. And that is certainly true, as we said in our prayer of confession today. But this psalm also means that God knows the goodness, the holiness that resides in our hearts as well. God sees when we reflect his holiness out onto the world. God sees when we choose to live like Christ and have a mind like Christ. God sees when we let the Holy Spirit guide us and lead us in our choices and our words. **God sees who is holy and who is not.** God will not be fooled or mocked. And, scripture tells us, in the end, it is God who will judge whether or not we enter into his throne room and remain there in his holiness forever.

So, let's take a look at some folks we all know about and see if we would judge holiness the same way as God judges holiness. Let's take Mother Teresa, for example. (Show picture at 943). Mother Teresa was the Catholic nun who gave up everything to travel to Calcutta, India to care for the least of these in Indian society. She cared for the lepers there. She touched them. She gave them food and housing. She loved them. The humans around her thought she was nuts. Many in Indian society couldn't understand why she would care for the people who were the lowest on the totem pole, the ones who, according to their faith, deserved to be where they were because of some past sin they had committed in a prior life. But what do you think God saw when he looked at Mother Teresa?

I would say that God saw the holiness in Mother Teresa shining forth in everything she did. God knew that she was following the teachings of Jesus throughout the New Testament that say, "love your neighbor." God saw the image of Christ that was growing bigger and bigger and bigger in Teresa's heart with every passing day. God doesn't see as the humans see. God saw her holiness.

That one was an easy one. I threw you a soft ball with that one. But here's another one: There's a picture and a video that has been circulating widely on the news and the internet of the 21 ISIS fighters who are walking along the beach with 21 Coptic Christians. (Show picture at 943). The ISIS fighters are dressed in black and the Christians are dressed in orange jumpsuits. The Christians are being led to their deaths. Two rows of men, all of whom claim to be following God.

When the ISIS militants and their kin look at this picture, who would they say are the holy ones? I believe without a doubt they would say that the ones dressed in black, the ISIS fighters, the ones carrying the knives, the ones who will do the beheading, are the holy ones carrying out God's will. That would be the human point of view among those folks.

But when God looks down from his holy throne in heaven, he is not fooled by the scene or by their pious words. No, God has searched and has known each and every one of them. God knows when they sit down and when they rise up. God is acquainted with all of their ways. God will not be fooled by pious words. God sees that the holiness in this picture lies in the men in the orange jumpsuits, who

are being killed for their faith. God sees the ones who have Christ in their hearts. They are saints by virtue of their connection with Jesus. They are saints because they have accepted the invitation to be like God, to be holy, “a holy nation, God’s own people.” The men in orange will see God while he sits on his holy throne and God will see the holiness in their hearts and will welcome them home.

My last example is a more personal one, and goes like this: What about you? What about me? When God looks at us, what does he see? Does God see holiness? Are you more like Bill Murray? Are you more like Mother Teresa? Each one of us is different in the eyes of God. Each one of us has a unique pattern of holiness inside. Each one of us has the capacity for holiness by virtue of our relationship with Christ. Some of us have a long way to go to be truly holy, while some of us are almost completely there. But God sees our journey.

So when God extends to you an invitation to holiness, an invitation to be a saint, what will you do? Will you accept that invitation and try to become more like Christ? Will you accept sainthood? Or will you turn him down and go your own way? Let’s all try to be God’s holy nation together.

Praise be to God. Amen