

“SAINTS(,) TOGETHER”

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Butler, PA
January 15, 2017, the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A

Text: *“To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

-- 1 Corinthians 1:2-3, NRSV

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.



Simeon Stylites (sti-LITE-eez) the Elder (pictured at the left). . . I passed right by his memorial day on January 5th . . . How about you? . . . Perhaps one or two of you may have stopped long enough in taking down the Christmas decorations to notice his day, but I’m guessing none of you did. I confess that I didn’t even know he had been beatified by the capital “C” Church, let alone that he had a day set aside in memory to him. I knew he was one of the unusual and great characters of Church history,

but I didn’t know he was a saint – you know, the kind that you find written about in The Book of the Saints . . . but there he was listed for memorial on January 5th – Simeon Stylites the Elder. And no, he wasn’t a Presbyterian . . . There weren’t too many of them around in the 5th century of the Common Era. Simeon Stylites was a God-seeker, a person who desired to give himself to Christ completely – but that’s not what made him unusual or memorable; it was the methods he used in giving himself up to God that set him apart from other God-seekers.

Simeon was a Stylite – a pillar-dweller (from the Greek word “stylos” which means “pillar”) – a monk who lived in Syria in the late fourth and early fifth century A.D. He was an ascetic, someone who



practiced an extreme form of Christian discipline through self denial and self-punishment. Simeon Stylites did this by standing on top of a pillar . . . *for days at a time?* (I know people that would do this to win a car) . . . *Weeks?* (Maybe in some extreme protest) . . . *You don't mean months . . . ? A year? More than a year? . . . Try Thirty-three years.*

Simeon Stylites the Elder stood day and night in the sun, the wind, the cold and the rain on top of a fifty foot tall pillar on a platform roughly 6 feet square.

(Note: The picture shows Simeon atop his pole. It is from the movie, "Simon of the Desert", produced in 1960, a surreal film focused on the life of Simeon.)

He was once a lowly shepherd boy who entered the monastery as a teenager, but he realized he was not fit for community life, so he became a solitaire. He practiced his faith – radical though it was – by himself – on top of a pole.

(Note: The picture at the right, by Robert Harding, shows what remains of the original pillar in the ruins of the basilica erected to Simeon's memory in Aleppo, Syria. Most of the damage down to it is not the result of warfare in the area, but the many thousands of pilgrims who have chipped off pieces of the column over the centuries.)



The column was a way to safeguard his faith – this move towards isolation – a way to express his devotion to God by removing himself from worldly pursuits and the rest of life's complications and concerns. And to many in his day, his peculiar pursuit of Godliness was an inspiration, yet one could say his pursuit of God was really a form of running away from others; a way to hide from the world . . . Simeon Stylites the Elder was a saint alone.

There are any numbers of reasons why people try to hide, or get away from others. I remember vividly my attempts some days to hide from Mrs. Sigley, my fifth grade teacher. Her eyes pierced the room in searchlight beams, like Sauron, the evil ruler in the Lord of the Rings, sweeping ceaselessly back and forth across the rows of desks searching for perfection and corruption among her students of

English grammar and syntax. I had a method of hiding in her class: I would slouch down just enough to frame myself behind the kid in front of me; eyes buried in my book – not unlike an ostrich in the sand. To my mind, I was invisible to my predator! But Mrs. Sigley was a lioness to my bird-brain and slinking up from behind, she struck with cat-like paws; my breath cut short by the pointed finger on my shoulder and the voice which boomed between heartbeats, *"Young man, what is a noun?"* . . . There was no pillar tall enough to escape that kind of misery.

This tendency for us to seek isolation strikes me as a poor attempt to solve our problems – something we do when we've been bad, or feel unprepared, or seek when we're afraid or angry, or escape to from life's pressures or pains, or the presence of others.

This is not what God encourages us to do. When Adam and Eve sought to hide, God went looking for them; when Gideon tried to escape from the armies of Midian, God sent an angel to call him out; when Elijah fled to Mount Horeb to escape, the Lord called to him after a while, saying, "What are you doing here?" Jesus himself, in the agony of the cross met the isolating grief of his mother and that of a friend with the words, *"Woman, behold your son,"* and *"Son, behold your mother,"* putting them into relationship; nor did he allow Cleopas and his friend to grieve in isolation on the Emmaus Road on that first Easter Sunday, but joined them in conversation, staying with them until their hearts burned with the recognition of their risen Lord . . .

God has never intended his children to live as separated selves. The very reason Christ Jesus entered into human history was to call his children – once lost to each other in isolation and fear, doubt and mistrust – together! And by his acts of service in the world, issue a call to serve one another.

And as though acknowledging God's desire to incorporate the human family, the apostle Paul begins this first letter to the Corinthians with these words: *"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the*

name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

. . . *Called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .* Paul is calling the Church together – "saints together" – and the New Testament word for Church is "*ekklesia*" which means "the community of the gathered."

Saints together . . . The word saint in Greek is "hagios" – it means, "One set apart from the ordinary." And one set apart from the ordinary, by God and for God, is made "holy". Saints ("hagioi") are "holy ones" because God has differentiated the holy from the profane – lifted them out of ordinary. Funny thing about the use of this word: It is fairly common in the New Testament – used over sixty times throughout its pages (And the number of New Testament references are twice as many times as it is used in the Old Testament). The word "hagioi" is Paul's descriptive term of choice when referring to the Church. He uses this plural form thirty times in his letters, but in all those references, the word is never used in the singular – "hagios" . . . not once. There is no reference anywhere to "a saint." As if to suggest that there is no such thing as a saint, alone! That's not to say there are no saints – I'm looking at them right now! But it seems to be the New Testament pattern to conceive of sainthood in plural terms; community terms – the "hagioi" . . . "Called to be saints together", if you will, "with all those who in every place call on the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. . ."

God's activity never happens in a vacuum. Our life as Christians begins within the community of faith in Baptism and is continually nourished through that community; empowering us to serve as light to the world; a world holed-up in isolated places and darkened corners.

We are meant to be "saints together" never saints alone because we derive energy from each other, grow in faith through the expression of each other's gifts given for common use – to live in community bearing one another's burdens and buoyed up one another's blessings!

Martin Luther King, Jr. whom we remember tomorrow in his memorial day was not a solitary pillar-dweller of a saint, but one who understood that power for change and the dynamic energy to make a difference came from all God's children becoming saints together in the common cause of righteousness and justice. Dr. King once said, *"Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate men with God but to integrate men with men and each man with himself."* He said that *"whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."* Dr. King knew that separation and isolationism is not what God intends for us. In speaking of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he said, *"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But... the Good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"*



(Above: "Allerheiligenbild" – "All Saints image" (the Adoration of the Trinity) by Albrecht Durer, 1511, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.)

This was God's own question about us answered in the incarnation of the Word made flesh, so great is it his desire to be present with his people – a relationship costing not less than everything Jesus had in order for us to be made holy – saints together – in the community of the gathered, the Church, whose one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. To whom be all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen.

In the Name of the Father, Son and holy spirit, Amen.