

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Claiming Our Identity: A Saint-tified Church”

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September 9, 2018

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

The date was April 15, 1952. It was early in the morning when the Navy corpsman strode down the hallway at the Naval hospital in Oceanside, California. Cradled in one arm was a new born, crying for his life. In his other arm were clean sheets. Somewhere in one of the many wards of the hospital, the corpsman stopped at the bedside of a first-time mother. “Mrs. Judson,” he said, “Here is your new son. And here are sheets. Please get up as soon as you can and change the linen on your bed.” With that he strode away leaving my mother in tears. She was far from home. My dad was getting ready to ship out to the Korean conflict. A couple of days later, when my parents and my older brother David arrive at their temporary residence, they had no idea what to do with this baby that would not stop crying. Finally, in exasperation and exhaustion, my mother turned to my dad and asked, “What do I do with this child?” Have any of you ever asked this question...even when you children, nephews, nieces, students were teens or adults? So, what do we do with this child, these children?

For most of human history the answer has been to make them work. They worked because survival depended upon it. Children were actually a drain on a family until they could contribute to planting, harvesting or caring for animals. This continued through the Industrial Revolution where children worked long hours and on dangerous jobs because they could do things that adults could not. Even today, in some places such as in northern Kenya, our missionary, Faith Kasoni, works with families trying to convince them to send their daughters to school rather than just having them tend cattle and goats. As societies developed, the decision was made to teach them. The questions then became, what do we teach them? How large are the classes? What is the curriculum? Do we use public, private or parochial schools? Then there is the question of how to keep children safe. Do we wrap them in bubble wrap, or let them wander freely? Then there are all the other questions of when they get their first phone, how much screen time ought they to have, how many sports can they play at once, and on and on. Again then, what do I, we, do with this child?

I will tell you what my mother did. She depended on two things to help her answer the question. She trusted in Spock and the saints. I realize that this sounds like a Star Trek pop group, but it isn't. The Spock in this case was Dr. Benjamin Spock. She bought his Baby and Childcare book, and according to her, it saved her sanity and our lives. The saints will take a bit more explaining. Growing up, the word “saint” meant the guys that were in the pictures on the Sunday school hallways. They were the people around Jesus who had these strange glowing things over their heads, which I later learned were halos. I always wondered what they did with them when they took a bath, or if they went out at night...yes, I was a strange child. But as my good Southern Baptist, become Presbyterian mother taught me, the saints were not those perfect people, but were the folks who surrounded my brothers and me in church. This role is made clear by the Apostle Paul in the opening of 1 Corinthians. He sends this letter to the saints, meaning to those men and women, set apart by God to be a particular kind of person, living in a particular kind of

community, that does particular things. And all of that could be summed up in the Shema, the passage we read from Deuteronomy, that the saints were to be people who loved God with all their heart, soul and strength and helped their children do the same. These were the saints to which my parents turned to help them raise their four sons; the saints of St. Paul Presbyterian Church who worked hard to love us, teach us and show us what it meant to be saints. With that in mind I would like us to take a few minutes and reflect on what this call to be saints means for us, the saints of First Presbyterian Church.

First, being the saints means that we are to help our children in this church learn what it means to love God with all their heart, soul and might. We are to help them to understand not only that they are loved by God, but that God desires to be loved in return. For many of us, this might seem like a stretch because we have seen the Laws of God, as rigid, no fun rules. But this part of God's Law reminds us that we are commanded to love God because God loves us. And teaching this to our children is what we promise to do every time we baptize a child. We promise to pray for them, support them, teach them and work with their parents to help them grow into the full stature of Christ. And speaking of baptism, one of the things I am often asked by families preparing to baptize their children, is can they have god-parents? Have any of you ever been god-parents (a few raised their hands)? Wrong, all of you have been god-parents because of what you pledged in baptism. So, the first part of being a saint-tified people is to be those who teach our children, youth and yes, even adults, what it means to love God with all of heart, soul and strength because God first loved them.

Second, being the saints means that we are to care for all children, youth and adults, regardless of who they are and where they live. I realize that this seems to be an overwhelming task since there are more than seven-billion people on earth today, with a quarter of those being children. It would be easy for us to sequester ourselves within these church walls and only be the saints to our own children. Yet Jesus will not let us. When asked about the greatest commandment, he not only quotes the Shema, but he adds to it the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. To illustrate this, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan, intimating that all people, even if they are very different from us, are our neighbors. So how do we live out this second half of being a saint-tified people? There are multiple ways to do this. There are Boys and Girls Clubs, the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care, Project Hope, just to name a few. But there is one in particular to which I believe this church has been called. I believe that God has called us out to love the children at Alcott Elementary school by partnering with their parents, teachers and administrators, so that those children can reach their full, God given potential and by our presence let them know that they matter; that they are valuable.

This is what it means to be a saint-tified church. It means helping not only our children, but all children come to know that they are loved by God and that they can love God in return. It also means that for you parents, regardless of the age of your children, that you are not alone. You are surrounded in this place by the saints who are here to partner with you as you rear your children and go through all of the struggles that entails. My challenge to you this morning then is twofold. First it is, to ask yourselves, how am I living as one of the saints, helping children here in this church, and around the world, to know what it means to love God with all their heart, soul and strength, and to love their neighbors as themselves? Second, it is, to ask yourselves, how I am to allow this saint-tified community to help me help my children to know the same.