

Sermon for Sunday, June 28, 1981 by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"SAINTS WITH TARNISHED HALOS"

Ephesians 4:11-16

Text: "...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Ephesians 4:12

Do you consider yourself to be a Christian? Have you accepted Jesus as your personal savior? Then I have some news for you. You are a saint. Do you find that hard to believe? Well, let me tell you something that is even harder to believe! If your spouse is a Christian, he or she is also a saint. Do you think your spouse qualifies as a saint? Don't answer out loud--you may get in trouble!

The Greek word in the Bible that is translated "saint" is the word agios, which literally means "holy". Are you really holy? Do you qualify to be a saint? The people at Corinth didn't seem to qualify. When St. Paul wrote to them he exposes some of the problems they were having in the Corinthian church. They were guilty of incest, greed, idolatry, drunkenness, abusing holy communion, stealing, and goodness knows what else. Yet, when St. Paul writes to them he addresses them as those, "called to be saints." Well, if they were saints, their halos were certainly badly tarnished!

Is your halo tarnished? Mine is. If saints are clothed in gleaming white garments, my robe is dirty and tattered, a filthy rag. At best I am a sorry looking saint! Do you look any better? Since neither of us has done anything to deserve being called a saint--since both of us are wearing our halos around our ears--it ought to be apparent to us that we have not acquired sainthood on our own.

That's the first point I want to make this morning. I am a saint because of Jesus, not because of me. You have not earned your sainthood either--it is a gift from Jesus. Do you remember how the Bible puts it? In Romans 3:23-24 we read, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." So our sainthood has not been earned. It is conferred on us as a gift.

Do you begin to understand how you get to be a saint? The Bible says "there is none righteous, no, not one." It says, "All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10,12) So that includes your spouse (which you already suspected!), it includes your pastor, and it also includes you. That means none of us is going to be a saint on our own. Instead, the Bible tells us that God justifies the person who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:26) If you have faith in Jesus you are a saint. When you accept him as savior, he steps between you and God. And when God looks at you he can't see you for Jesus. He sees Jesus instead. That means he doesn't see my sinfulness; he doesn't see my faults and failures; he doesn't see my rebellion and disobedience. No, he sees the sinlessness of Jesus and he thinks it is I! (now, of course I don't really think that God doesn't know who he is seeing. But that is a graphic and vivid way of expressing what Jesus does for us. He puts himself between us and God and God counts us as righteous even tho we aren't. That is what forgiveness is all about.)

So the first point I want to make is that you and I are saints, not because of us, but because of Jesus. The second point I want to make is this: I am a saint in process. Let me see if I can make that a little clearer. Because of Jesus I am declared a saint. Of course, I'm really not a saint--at least not yet--but still I am declared a saint. But now comes the hard part. You see, now God expects me to become what I have been declared to be. Now I am called to grow into what God says I am. Does that make sense to you? In effect God says, "I declare you a saint. Now get busy and become one."

That is what I meant when I said I am a saint in process. And that should be true for every Christian. All of us should be striving, and trying and growing into the sainthood we already have. Let me ask you this: are you growing into your saint's robe? Back during the depression when times were hard, my family had very little money for clothes. When my mother bought new clothes for my brother and me she always bought them a size or two too large. That way, they lasted longer as we grew. When I would first put on my new clothes they just swallowed me up. When I complained that they were too big, mother would always say, "don't worry, you will grow into them." Sure enough, I always did. Well, is that still true for me when it comes to my saint's robe? Is your saint's robe as large on you as mine is on me? Well, God is calling us to grow. God is expecting us to mature and develop until our robes fit.

Well, none of us is perfect. We are all in process. Those of you who have attended a Gothard Seminar may remember lapel pins you got that had on it the letters "P B P G I F W M Y". And those letters stood for "Please be patient, God isn't finished with me yet." Well, that is what St. Paul was talking about in our Scripture for this morning when he said we were to keep on working until we "all attain...to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children..."

So I am called a saint, but the question I have to ask myself is this: am I growing into my saint's robe? If I mark my spiritual height on the door frame, am I taller than I was last year? What about you? As a saint in process, have you grown since last year? Incidentally, as a sort of aside, I might add that this is where the Holy Spirit comes into the Christian faith. You see, on my own I don't grow at all. As a matter of fact, on my own I discover I am shrinking. But when I open my heart to the power of the Holy Spirit--when I let the spirit control my will and my life--then He helps me do and be what I can't on my own. That's why you need the Holy Spirit in your heart and your life. He gives us the power and ability to grow, to be God's person when we couldn't do it on our own power.

So, first I am declared a saint. Second, I am a saint in process. With a tarnished halo and a robe too big, God calls me to grow into what I have been declared to be. The third point I want to make is this: it is to saints tripping over robes too big; it is to saints with tarnished halos hanging around their ears to whom God gives the job of ministry.

Do you feel as though you are an unlikely saint? I feel the same way. Yet it is to saints such as we whom God calls to be his people in the world. It is saints like we who are called to build up the body of Christ--the church. Doesn't that strike you as rather incredible? When God called Moses to go to Egypt and bring out the children of Israel, Moses said, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?" (Exodus 3:11) Well, I know exactly how Moses felt!

Who am I--who are you--that God should call us to minister and to build up his Church? Do you remember what God said to Moses? Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh" and God replied, "But I will be with you."

That's God's promise still. He calls us--unlike saints--saints with tarnished halos and robes too big--to serve him in his church. And in spite of how inadequate we feel, God says, "I will be with you."

I wish I could impress on you in some dramatic, some indelible way, that God calls you--every one of you--to ministry at Central. God hasn't called a one of you to a sainthood where you sit on a cloud, eat milk and honey, and play your harp. As someone has said, God calls us into his vineyard to hoe and not to eat grapes.

My job is different from yours. You and I don't have the same jobs. In our scripture this morning, the Bible says, "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." Now, the Bible is talking about what we might call the professional clergy. I fit in that category. So some are called to special jobs. But what is the so-called professional clergy to do? What is their job? The Bible says some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers--and then the Bible says why they are called--it says, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry..." So I am an equipper. I have the job of equipping you for the work of ministry. I don't do the ministry--you do. And the question I have to ask myself--and the question all of our professional staff members have to ask themselves--is this: Am I equipping the saints? But the question you have to ask yourself is this: am I doing the work of ministry?

Well, are you? God calls you to be a saint. He calls you to ministry. So what is your ministry? How are you serving the Lord in building up the body of Christ? You see, Christianity is not a spectator sport. We are all called to play on God's team. It is not enough even to be a Christian in your private life. No, God calls us every one to participate in building up the body of Christ. The one thought I want to leave with you--the one question you should be wrestling with this morning is this: what am I doing or what am I willing to do to become the saint God has called me to be?

Then I would say a word to those of you who have not yet become saints. Jesus wants to stand between you and God so that when God looks at you, he doesn't see you--he doesn't see you with all your sins and failures--but he sees Jesus instead as though it were you. Let me share a story with you. Rev. A.C. Dixon, a great Baptist preacher who was born in the mountains of Virginia, tells how many years ago in his area there was a school which no teacher could handle. The boys were so rough the teachers resigned.

A young, grey-eyed teacher applied, and the old director scanned him, then said, "Young feller, do you know that you are asking for?" "I'll risk it," replied the young man. Finally, he appeared for duty. One big fellow named Tom whispered, "I won't need any help. I can lick him myself." The teacher said, "Good morning, boys, we have come to conduct school!" They yelled at the top of their voices.

"Now, I want a good school, but confess I do not know how unless you help me. Suppose we have a few rules. You tell me and I will write them on the black board." One fellow yelled, "No stealin'!" Another yelled, "On time." Finally, ten rules appeared. "Now," said the teacher, "a law is no good unless there is a penalty attached. What shall we do with the one who breaks them?" "Beat him across the back ten times without his coat on." "That is pretty severe, boys. Are you ready to stand by it?" Another yell, and the teacher said, "School comes to order." In a day or so the big boy named Tom found his lunch was stolen. Upon inquiry the thief was located--a little hungry fellow, about ten. Then next morning the teacher announced, "We have found the thief and he must be punished according to your rule--ten stripes across the back. Jim, come up here!" The little fellow, trembling came up slowly with a big coat fastened up to the neck and pleaded, "Teacher, you can lick me as hard as you like, but please don't make me take my coat off." "Take that coat off; you helped make the rules!" "O teacher, don't make me!" He began to unbutton and what did the teacher behold! Lo, he had no shirt on.

"How can I whip this child?", thought the teacher. "But I must do something if I keep this school." Everything was as quiet as death. "How come you to be without a shirt, Jim?" He replied, "My father died and mother is very poor. I have only one shirt to my name, and she is washing that today, and I wore my brother's big coat to keep warm."

The teacher, with rod in hand, hesitated. Just then Tom jumped to his feet and said, "Teacher, if you don't object, I will take Jim's licking for him." "Very well," said the teacher, "There is a law that one can become a substitute for another. Are you all agreed?" Off came Tom's coat, and after five hard strokes the rod broke. The teacher bowed his head in his hands, and thought, "How can I finish this awful task?" Then he heard the entire school sobbing, and what did he see? Little Jim had reached up and caught Tom with both arms around the neck. "Tom, I am sorry I stole your lunch, but I was awful hungry. Tom, I'll love you till I die for taking my licking for me!"

You and I have broken all the rules and we deserve eternal punishment. But Jesus took our whipping for us. He died in our place. He wants to put his saint's robe on you and to stand between you and God. He calls you to be a saint. He calls you to the work of ministry. Yes, he calls--will you answer.