

I Know What I Can Be By What I See
Rev. Dorothy Boulton
November 6, 2022

But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

2 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Today is a day to give thanks. On this All Saints Sunday, we remember and honor those who showed us how to live in faith, how to serve with joy.

On this day, I appreciate the words of Paul – words that echo throughout his letters that give thanks and encouragement to the saints in the early church. He is always reminding them of who they are, and what he has taught them. He urges them to endure hardship & affliction, to live in hope, to hold fast to what is good, to continually grow in love and to live lives that are pleasing to God.

In his letters, Paul offers advice and wise council. He instructs them, admonishes them, encourages them, prays for them. These ancient saints....whose thoughts and deeds we only know second hand, form part of the great procession of those who have formed and guided our faith. They have shaped our decisions, our understanding of what God calls us in Christ to do and to be.

This morning we honor those whose lives have touched us *directly* – they are our friends, our relatives, our spouse, our loved ones – people who, as the author of Hebrews says, are now part of the “great cloud of witnesses.” We take the time, as Jan Richardson wrote, “to remember, to reflect, and to offer thanks for those who have shaped (our) path by the path that they walked.”

The title of this message, “I Know What I Can Be By What I See” was a phrase I heard on public radio this week. As soon as I heard those words, I thought immediately of these saints who have shaped our paths. Those words were spoken by Troy Vincent, an NFL executive, on an NPR radio program. It was about the woefully small number of Black head coaches in professional football. ¹

He understood, of course, that we imagine our future, our possibilities, the things that we can strive for and hope for, because we see someone already living that out. You can imagine yourself a preacher if you see someone of your gender in the pulpit. You know you can fly that plane, command that spaceship, win that tournament if someone with your skin color or sexual orientation has done it before.

We grow in our faith, we live into our Christian calling, because someone has shown us what we can be. We see how the Spirit has sanctified them – shown the life of Christ in their lives. We see what that looks like through their choices, by their example. We see it by the way they treated other people, in the ways they faced challenge and adversity, in their hopes and dreams for their lives and this world.

Who was it, who is for you that enables you to know what you can be? Who is someone who pointed out your gifts? Who let you ask your questions? Who embodied the values you aspire to? Who showed you how to be brave? Who included you when you felt unseen or unwanted? Who has treasured you? Who has prayed for you?²

For me, one of my saints is the man who was the minister of my church when I was growing up, Rev. James Pierce. “Mr. Pierce,” we called him. He was the one who introduced me to call and response scripture, like we did in our call to worship. I still remember how he played a record during a sermon (!) – The Temptations’ “Ball of Confusion” – which is a great song, and a fierce cry for radical justice. From him, I realized that, “Sure, you can do that in worship.” The words of the prophets are written on subway walls, tenement halls, and long playing record albums. And, during this thin season of the year, I recall him telling a story of something that happened to him – I don’t remember the exact details – it was an unexpected and unlikely encounter that was mysterious and mystical, and from that, I learned to honor those experiences as well. Most of all appropriate to this day, I heard from him his vision of what it is to pass from this life and enter into the communion of saints. His vision was one of welcome, joyful re-connection, with the ones we love, together, eternally, in the presence of God.

I hold to that vision still.

Who has shown you what you can be, saints?

When I look at the names of those who are printed in our bulletin today, those who have been called home during this past year, I see many from this congregation. They are people who have shown us who we can be – faithful people, loving people, passionate advocates for justice, people who have used their hands and hearts in service to Jesus Christ.

I see Dot Kielman. We'll be celebrating her 100 years of life at an afternoon gathering today. Dot was one of the best cooks ever. And she shared that gift making food for one of our mission partners, Light Street Soup Kitchen in Baltimore. I see Bill Quigley whose countless hours as a trustee contributes to the accessibility of this building, and the preservation of it for the use of the community and this congregation. I see Libby Wolf who died one year ago, today. I hear her voice: "I love to sing!" she'd say in her beautiful North Carolina cadence. And oh, "How I love this church!" I see Lee Van Koten. Lee inspired so many of us with his dedication to justice, to visible expressions of care. His affection and grace in the We Choose Welcome ministry with a refugee family is but one example of his tender heart. And we honor him still as we participate in the Seafarers Ministry, contributing gifts so that these unrecognized people – working on ships that come into the Baltimore harbor – these people who sacrifice so much for us, can have some measure of joy and appreciation at Christmastime.

We see these names and honor these persons – all of them – and know that they have shaped our lives. Many have loved us, given us an example of who we can be. For all that the Spirit has given through them, we are grateful and we are blessed.

There is quite a measure of grief, to be sure. And our prayers surround those who feel deeply the pain of loss. And it is the ministry of each of us, to continue to uphold one another in our sorrow. And so we honor the tears that flow, the hearts that break.

As we gather at the table, the meal to which Christ Jesus himself invites us, we continue to remember. We treasure memories, we give thanks for the saints – for all in them that was good and kind and faithful. At this table, we are reminded that "in the body of Christ, death does not release us from being in community with one another." Jan L. Richardson, janrichardson.com

We gather here as saints --- saints below and saints above. We unite together in praise and thanksgiving, knowing that God's love for us is eternal and unchanging. In this

meal, this mystic supper, we remember who we are, whose we are. And whose we always will be.

May this meal nourish us, inspire us, renew us, connect us, sustain us. May we see the outpouring of grace, of abundant amazing love, and dare to imagine what we can be.

¹ [NPR: Studio 1A, Tuesday Nov. 1 How The NFL Disadvantages Black Coaches.](#)

² Rejoicing in God's Saints: A Daily Prayer Calendar for November. 2018 Laura Stephens-Reed, Clergy Coach and Congregational Consultant, laurastephensreed.com