

"CALLED TO BE SAINTS"

May 14, 1989

TEXT: I Corinthians 1: "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 upon the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

As most of you already know, today is Mothers' Day. And I hope we will honor that --for we owe our mothers more than we can say. In my pastoral prayer this morning, I called them the dearest of all God's earthly gifts. And so they are. For, of all our human loves, surely theirs is closest to God's own love.

But today is also Pentecost, one of the great, yet often overlooked, festivals of the Church year. Overlooked especially by Congregationalists, who, by and large, are not much interested in "holy days." Epiphany, Ascension Day, Trinity Sunday, these we generally ignore. For most of us, Christmas and Easter are probably enough. Yet we really ought to re-discover Pentecost. For without it, Christmas and Easter would long ago have been forgotten.

You see, it was Pentecost which turned that weak, confused, and --above all-- frightened, band of leaderless disciples into the church which conquered the world. It was not the birthday of the church as it is frequently called. But it was certainly the day when the church first came of age. The day when it began to fulfill its promise. And if today's Church is to fulfill its promise, we, too, need a Pentecost, a renewal of both power and purpose.

That is the key. Power and Purpose. All of us want power, it seems, but sometimes we are not so interested in purpose. Unless, of course, the purpose is our own. And, yet, the two can not be separated. God's power flows only to those who will use it for God's purpose. And, when we sometimes find ourselves confused and powerless, it is often because we have lost touch with God. What we need, then, is a revival. A revival of commitment to God and God's will.

But what is that will? What is it we are called to be committed to? One answer is found in this morning's scripture lesson. Paul addressed that letter "~~To the Church of God which is at Corinth,~~ to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be

saints together with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ."

"Called to be saints." At first that may sound a little strange. Most of us have probably gotten used to the idea that we are sinners. (We may not like it, but we are used to it.) But not "saints." That one bothers us. You know it does. If I had begun my sermon this morning with the words, "My Fellow Sinners", I think you would have understood. But, if I had said, "My Fellow Saints", I suspect you would have been surprised --and embarrassed. Still, that is exactly what Paul calls us.

You see, for Paul --and for our Pilgrim ancestors-- the church was not a building; it was people. People who, though sinners, were nevertheless "called to be saints." The word "called" is important. It represents a basic Christian concept. In Greek, the word Paul used for church is ekklesia, and it means "called out." "To the called out of God at Corinth, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord." See how important the word is. And it is not just some strange idea of Paul's. Again and again, in both the Old and the New Testaments, God calls people to serve His purpose. At first, it is just individuals, people like Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Gideon. Then the concept expands until it reaches all of Israel. And, finally, through Paul it extends to all of us, "to all in any place who call on the name of our Lord."

Of course, that is very different from the way it seems to us. From our point of view, we join a church because we want to. We decide what church, if any, to attend. We determine when, if ever, to join; which activities, if any, appeal to us; and how much support, if any, we are willing to give. We go to church when we want. And our reaction to the service usually depends on how it makes us feel. Small wonder we sometimes think the church exists for us.

Yet, nothing would be farther from the truth. The church is God's creation, founded for His purpose, intended to serve His will. Its existence and ~~our~~ participation are both in answer to God's call. That is why we are taught to pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are a people called by God.

And, as noted earlier, we are "called to be saints." Perhaps that word will not seem so strange if we understand its true meaning. In Greek the word is hagios, which means something or someone consecrated to God. It means to be set apart or different, not just like everyone else. Not completely different, of course. But different enough to make a difference. Different enough to show the world a new and better way.

The world, you see, pre-occupies itself with getting and consuming. We are called to be different. When threatened in any way, the world retaliates. We are called to be different.

The world asks, "What's in it for me?" We are called to be different. The world sees its brothers and sisters in need; naked, or hungry, or cold, and says, "That's their problem. I have troubles enough of my own." We are called to be different. And, according to a recent Gallup poll, much of the world believes in God but rarely thinks about Him. We are called to be different. That is what the word "saint" means. Not perfect, not faultless, but different.

And different in a very specific way. Richard Burton --the poet, not the actor-- expressed it this way:

"No monkish garb he wears, no beads he tells
Nor is immured in walls remote from strife
But from his heart deep mercy ever wells
He looks humanely forth on human life.

"No medieval mystery, no crowned
Dim figure, halo rimmed, uncanny bright
A modern saint, a man who treads earth's ground
And ministers to men with all his might."

That is the difference meant by Paul's word "saint." And it is a crucial difference, indeed. If God's love is to be seen by the world. Seen so clearly, so convincingly, that people may trust it and share it. Then it has to be lived out in community. A community of God's own people. To be saints, then, does not mean being pious or perfect. It means being part of God's loving family, where people are cherished and accepted, treasured and built up --no matter what. It is not so much what we do as what we are --and especially what we are together. Each one nourishing, enabling, supporting, and encouraging the others.

Do those words sound familiar? Nourishing, enabling, supporting, encouraging. Who does that sound like? Who do we know who does that sort of thing? We all can, of course, and most of us probably do --now and then. But who makes a practice of it? Who is best known for it? Our mothers, of course. And who was it who made us feel cherished and accepted? Who treasured us and built us up? Our mothers.

So this is a Mothers' Day sermon after all. For it certainly would not be too far off to translate Paul's salutation with these words, "To the called-out of God at Corinth, sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be "mothers" with those in every place who call on the name of our Lord."

Called to be mothers. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor. All of us, mothers to each other and mothers to the world. When our churches and their individual members rediscover that Divine call, when we are willing to give it our first priority in life, when we really commit ourselves to God's purpose, then, God's power will flow as never before in our lifetime. Then we shall receive power from on high and be God's witnesses, in Wauwatosa, in Wisconsin, in the United States of America, and to the ends of the earth.