

Epiphany  
Ephesians 3:1-12

### **The Least of All the Saints**

Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians from a jail cell. He said,

“I am the very least of all the saints.”

What exactly is a saint?

My immediate, knee-jerk image of a ‘saint’  
is someone who is pure and good.

A saint doesn’t think bad thoughts or lose their patience with other people  
or feel sorry for themselves.

At the same time, even though I admire them.

a saint is someone who would make me uncomfortable to be around.

I wouldn’t want to spend a lot of time around a saint  
because somehow their purity and goodness  
would make me self-conscious about my faults and doubts  
and failures and bad thoughts.

Today is the start of ‘Epiphany’ on the church calendar.

‘Epiphany’ means the sudden understanding  
of the essential nature or meaning of something.

An ‘epiphany’ is an ‘Aha!’ moment.

All of a sudden something that was fuzzy or baffling or superficial  
becomes clearer - more focused – more real.

We understand something for what it really is instead of merely  
having an idea *about it*..

I came across an article this week, an interview with Eugene Peterson,  
the Presbyterian pastor who wrote The Message Bible.

The title of the article is “The Business of Making Saints”  
and I had an epiphany of what it means to become a saint.

I had a sudden understanding of what it really means to become a saint  
after I read about Peterson's example of an encounter he had  
with a member of his church.

He says,

"A woman had just become a Christian and joined the congregation.  
She was around 40 years old and divorced.  
She didn't know much about the faith.  
She was always living with somebody or other;  
that was just the way she lived.

She came to me for a year or so because  
she was trying to get her life in order,  
and I was teaching her how to pray.

Sometimes I'd listen to her and think,  
    'Should I say something about her sexual lifestyle?  
    She's in church every Sunday.  
    She knows what I believe.  
She's got to know something about the Ten Commandments.  
But somehow I never felt I should say anything.

After about a year, I said to her,  
    "Would you do something for me?"  
She said, "Sure. What do you want me to do?"  
    "Would you live celibate for six months?" I asked.  
"Why would I do that?" she replied.

I said, "I'm not going to give you any reasons.  
    I just think I know you pretty well,  
    and we're trying to figure out how to live this Christian life.  
Just do it. Do it for me."

She said, "Well, I don't see the point of it. But, yeah"

She started to live celibate.

After two or three months, she said to me,  
    "Thank you for that. I have never felt so free.  
    I didn't know you could live this way.

I know the Bible says something about it,  
but I thought times had changed so much that  
you couldn't do this.  
I don't know anybody who lives this way.  
Thank you. This is wonderful. Things are coming together for me."

She thought she was coming to me to bless her  
in her life the way she was;  
at some point it seemed right to interfere with that.

Thankfully, I waited long enough so that the Seventh Commandment  
became a word of freedom to her  
rather than some kind of oppression."

As they say in the football broadcast booths,  
let's go back and 'review the replay'  
to see what the encounter had to do with  
the business of making saints.

"A woman had just become a Christian and joined the congregation.  
She was around 40 years old and divorced.  
She didn't know much about the faith.  
She was always living with somebody or other;  
that was just the way she lived."

How do we see each person who walks through our church doors  
and sits in a pew on Sunday mornings?

Do we judge each other for what we can only see with our eyes  
or do we have faith in God and each other,  
that God is not done with any of us yet?

Do we meet each other where we are, as God does,  
or do we hold off or even worse, outright reject someone  
because they don't measure up to our standards?

Peterson met the woman right where she was in her life,  
in the same way God meets each of us wherever we are in life.

“Sometimes I’d listen to her and think,  
Should I say something about her sexual lifestyle?  
She knows what I believe.  
But somehow I never felt I should say anything.”

There are times when we are called simply to listen to someone.  
There are times to speak.  
Godly discernment is knowing the difference.  
Discernment comes from a life of relationship with God  
through prayer, worship, and Scripture  
that informs our relationships with other people.

After about a year, I said to her,  
“Would you do something for me?”  
“She thought she was coming to me to bless her  
in her life the way she was;  
at some point it seemed right to interfere with that”

Peterson let things happen in God’s time.  
It took a year for him to ‘interfere’.

And when he did feel called to speak,  
his words were an invitation,  
not a condemnation.  
The choice was the woman’s.  
He waited until a genuine trust had been built.

During the Cursillo weekend we’re told to  
“Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ.”  
Peterson became a friend first  
before leading her to a deeper understanding of Christ.

“Thank you. I have never felt so free.  
I didn’t know you could live this way.”

The gospel became real to this woman.  
She now understood through her own experience  
what Jesus meant when he said,

“I have come to give you abundant life and I give not as the world gives”.

Rather than seeing God’s commandments as a bunch of rules  
that restrict us from having a good time,  
she realized that walking in God’s ways  
truly is the way that leads to freedom and peace and joy and life.

Peterson’s story helps explain how St. Paul could sit locked  
in a lonely, dark, depressing jail cell day after day and  
write the grace-filled, hope-filled, rock-solid letter  
he wrote to the Ephesians.  
He was in prison but he was free.

His freedom came from following and obeying his Lord.  
In the process he became a saint.  
Not because he was perfect or a goody two-shoes  
but because he offered his life to be molded and shaped  
and used by the master potter for the potter’s use.

St. Paul was a very special saint.  
His words and the accounts of his life have been read  
and continue to be read by billions of Christians all over the world.

But, Peterson and the woman who came to him  
are saints in their own right, in their own context.

Saint making is counter culture.  
The culture demands instant gratification.  
Saint making is a slow process.  
The culture demands measurable results.  
Saint making takes shape in the depths of the human soul.  
The culture defines freedom as personal license.  
Saint making knows the mysterious secret that  
freedom comes from being a prisoner for Christ.

We are all saints in progress.  
May God give us all the grace and strength to continue the journey  
and walk together in truth and love.