

October 30, 2016:

Accidental Saints: Joseph

This morning, we are celebrating All Saints Sunday – where we remember those who have died this year, those who we are still grieving in our everyday lives, by reading or speaking their names aloud and lighting a candle in their memory. We also lift the names of our newly baptized saints... our brothers and sisters who have joined in the fellowship of the saints. When I came to Red Bank, I was introduced to this second piece as a new All Saints tradition, but I have to say – I LOVE IT! What a better way to help us remember on this All Saints Sunday that we are ALL SAINTS, living and dead, newly baptized and age old church goers! We are ALL called to live a life of sainthood... and certainly, to remember those who have gone before us, sharing their love and God's love with us through their life.

So, what makes a saint? If we are ALL saints – living and dead, young and old – what is it that we are called to do and be in this life of faith that is so special, as to call us saints? This word saint, comes from the Latin, "Sanctus" meaning "to be holy" – so as saints, we are called to a life of holiness --- Now, I don't know about you, but don't always feel holy...

It's easy to sit here in this beautiful church and feel surrounded by holiness, to feel close to God, centered in God's love, and to hope that God's spirit could work within us to bring about something holy, but it's much harder to feel that once we step outside these walls. Once we cross that threshold, it's like reality strikes, our weaknesses, the craziness of the world around, and all the other things that pull at us, for better or worse, and reorder our priorities, take hold. Being holy isn't exactly the first thing I'm thinking about when I'm driving in traffic, or food shopping, or dealing with the latest tantrum of my two-year old! I'm not sure how comfortable I am with the term Saint at those times...

But this, THIS is the reality of our faith... that in our everyday, ordinary lives, THIS is where God takes and makes accidental saints out of us all. Faith and holiness and sainthood is not just about what you do in church... but it's about how you live. It's about those everyday moments, even, and maybe especially those really hard days when we feel anything but holy, that God takes and uses us to do amazing things.

There's a Lutheran church in downtown Denver that has become well known as of late. The pastor started a new community of faith called "House for All Sinners and Saints" – intentionally focused on those who feel like outsiders in traditional church settings. Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber would not be described as pious by most church folk. She is frank about her wild past of alcohol and drug use, and her character flaws – how hard she finds it to be nice to people - and she tells stories that are funny, self-deprecating, and riddled with curse words. She wrote a book called *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, which we'll be drawing on throughout our series. In her book, she wrote, "My spirituality is most active in the moments when I realize God may have gotten something beautiful done through me despite the fact that I am [imperfect], and when I have to bear witness to another human being's suffering despite my desire to be left alone, and when I am forgiven by someone even though I don't deserve it and my forgiver does this because he too, is trapped by the gospel...and when I end up being changed by learning to love someone I'd never choose out of a catalog but whom God sends my way to teach me about God's love." These are the actions of a saint - those that make us holy –

for even when it is hard, even when we don't want to, we love and forgive and are present with those who suffer.

Today we open our series looking at one such saint – a man in our Bible who got the short end of the stick over and over throughout the course of his life, but yet persevered through heartbreaking situations and against all odds, he somehow remained faithful and dependent on God. In the Book of Genesis, we hear Joseph's story and imagine how he could have become a bitter and vengeful man, but instead chose the way of faithful service and forgiveness.

Joseph's painful journey began when he was only 17 years old and still living in the land of Canaan with his father and his older half-brothers. His father Jacob had married two sisters, Rachel and Leah – fueling a sibling rivalry between the two. Rachel, who was always Jacob's favorite only bore him two sons, Joseph and a younger brother Benjamin, and died during childbirth with her second son. Joseph's 10 older brothers were born from Leah and her handmaiden, as well as Rachel's handmaiden.

According to Genesis 37, Joseph's brothers hated him for several reasons. The heart of the problem was that their father played favorites – his mother Rachel had been Jacob's favorite, and now he extended his favoritism to Joseph. To show his special affection, he gave him a royal robe – known by many as the technicolor dream coat. This coat given out of affection became a symbol of his brothers' contempt for him. It seems that Joseph may have begun to "get airs" about himself, because he started to have dreams about his brothers bowing down to him – and he didn't just keep those dreams to himself, but shared them with his brothers. Not exactly the smartest move for brotherly bonding.

His brothers seemed to have had enough one day, so when Joseph went out in the fields to check on their work – a task asked of him by his father – his brothers stripped him of his special robe and threw him into an old well. When a caravan of merchants passed by, Judah suggested they sell their brother off as a slave, make a profit off him, rather than simply kill him – so they did – and to cover their tracks, spattered goat's blood on Joseph's special coat, showing it to their father as proof of his demise.

In the hands of the merchants, Joseph was taken down to Egypt and sold as a slave to Potiphar, a chief servant of Pharaoh. Even there, Joseph rose in favoritism and was placed in charge of Potiphar's household and entrusted to care for everything he owned. Unfortunately, Joseph's luck hit another snag, when Potiphar's wife – after repeated attempts at seducing Joseph and being denied – accused him of attempted rape, resulting in his imprisonment.

In prison, Joseph rose once again, gained the favor of the warden and was put in charge to essentially manage the prison. He served his fellow inmates as well, by interpreting their dreams, in hopes that when they were freed, they would help to free him in return. When the Pharaoh had a dream that needed interpreting and was told of Joseph's skills, and was called out of prison to be of service. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, projecting 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine, and was then placed in charge of managing the country to make sure they made it through the famine.

Now, because of Joseph's foresight and planning, stockpiling the bountiful harvest during the years of plenty, when the famine hit hard, all the world came to Egypt to buy grain – including Joseph's brothers. When the elder brothers came to ask for support, they did not recognize

Joseph, but he recognized them. I can't even imagine the thoughts going through his mind... the emotions flying through him at seeing the very people who had thrown him into a well, only to sell him into slavery. I imagine anger, resentment, fury, and possibly thoughts of revenge.

I invite us to just take a moment to think about a time in your life when someone had done wrong by you... what went on in your head and heart about that person? Did you have a "what goes around comes around" point of view? Were you like the Count of Monte Cristo – plotting out your revenge, waiting and hoping for the day when you could see the person pay for what they did to you? Or did you live into the spirit of forgiveness? The message that Jesus teaches of loving others, even your enemy...

Well, unfortunately, we don't get to hear into the mind of Joseph on that day... we can only imagine his emotional turmoil at seeing his brothers again. So how does he choose to respond? He sends them home with food and silver without hinting at their relation. He tells them to bring their youngest brother Benjamin, the brother of his late mother, back with them... and when eventually the brothers return in their need for more aid, Joseph breaks down and reveals his true identity. The elder brothers were, very naturally, fearful of how Joseph would treat them, this man of power and means who had once been treated so poorly by them. In our second scripture today, we heard the scene play out where the brothers stand before Joseph after their father dies, begging for his forgiveness. His response, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

When he could have become a bitter and vengeful man, he instead chose the way of faithful service and forgiveness. This story challenges us to look deeply within to see how we have overcome adversity and where God is calling us to forgive others and live out a spirit of servanthood. Are there people in your life that you are struggling to forgive? Are there past wrongs that still weigh on your heart? I invite you to take Joseph's story to heart – to remember Joseph's perseverance in the midst of adversity and struggle – and his unfailing faith that reassured him that God would take the mess he found himself in and make something beautiful from it. May we do likewise, living into the brother and sisterhood of the saints. Amen.