

## **2019 11 03 – Surrounded by the Saints**

**Luke 19:1-10**

**2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12**

This week I spent some time reading *Except the Lord Do Build This House*, a story of First United Church, Swift Current, Saskatchewan. This book was written by Baden Campbell in 1975, in honour of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The United Church of Canada. In the foreword to his book Baden wrote the following words, “When I started this story, I planned to include few names of individuals. But I soon realized that the Church was people, and that the contribution of each was the life of First United Church.”

Today is All Saints Sunday and on this day we remember the people in our lives, in our church and in our community who are no longer with us. We remember those who have died and are now closer to the God of love. We remember all those who have now joined “the communion of saints surrounding us all.” So I thought it was an appropriate time to read a little about our ancestors in the faith, the people who worked to build and sustain this First United Church of ours.

The story of the United Church in Swift Current begins in the 1880’s when both the Presbyterians and the Methodists met in people’s homes, in stores and even in the open air. Of course, the history of the Christian church goes back much farther than that. One of today’s scripture readings is from a letter to the church in Thessalonica and we know that that particular congregation was formed in the first century less than 20 years after Jesus died. Like the early churches in Swift Current they too were a small group who met in people’s homes and businesses.

All Saints Day is a day set aside to remember the dead, the ancestors in our faith and to give thanks for their lives. But what how do we determine who gets included on the list of saints? What does it take to receive that designation? If you are a part of the Roman Catholic Church then you are probably aware of a well-defined vetting process that is used before that term can officially be assigned. But in protestant churches and particularly, The United Church of Canada, we tend to use the word, saint, a little more freely.

Nancy Rockwell, a minister in the United States, wrote, "Saints are people who are windows in this world. The light of God shines through them so brightly that people say they have seen salvation in them."

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/a-short-story-about-saints-and-bullies/>

What a beautiful description. Can you think of people in your life who have been windows to God for you? They may be people that you know well, people that just acquaintances or even people that you have met only through their words on the written page. Saints are people who impact our lives in a positive way just because of who they are.

Jesus was certainly one of those people. The light of God shone so clearly through him that people left their jobs and their families to follow him. But, like many saints, Jesus also challenged the status quo and made people question their own understanding of the world. For instance, Jesus invited people like Zaccheus into his life and into his group of followers.

Zaccheus was the chief tax collector in his town, a role that earned him a good living but little respect and few friends. There's a good chance Zaccheus was bitter and resentful after being bullied all his life for being short, there's a good chance he was hard-to-talk to and viewed as a loner, there's a good chance Zaccheus even stole from his neighbours by charging a little surtax for himself. But Jesus, saw through this questionable exterior and chose instead to see the sacred hidden within Zaccheus. Jesus chose to bring healing to this unlikely man so that all could see that God's light shone in Zaccheus too, so that all could see that Zaccheus was also a saint.

If there's one thing we know it's that saints are not perfect. Paul begins his letter to the Thessalonians, by praising them for their faith and their perseverance in difficult times. But farther on this letter, past today's passage we find the following concern: "We hear that some of you are undisciplined, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies." (2 Thessalonian 3:11). Even in the early church people were human and yet our ancestors in the faith are also saints..

As you can imagine there were moments in the life of our own church that brought out the worst in our more recent ancestors. Back in the late 1930's and early 1940's work began to amalgamate the two United Churches in Swift Current. Metropolitan had been the Methodist church and Knox, the Presbyterian. They began the process by keeping both buildings and sharing a single minister. This is how Baden Campbell described the situation: "Rev. Jones [from Knox] accepted a call to Yorkton in 1941, and Rev. Ranns [from Metropolitan] occupied the pulpit in both churches on a rotation basis. But the

stress of the work, and the apparent self-interest of minority cliques of the congregation relating to amalgamation triggered his resignation.” As we all know, it’s often in times of change that our fear brings out the worst in even the most saintly among us. I’m happy to say that shortly afterward, the two congregations saw the light, asked their minister to reconsider his resignation and Rev. Ranns returned to complete the amalgamation process. (Except the Lord Do Build This House, pages 26-28)

It there’s one thing we know it’s that saints are not perfect. God chooses even the most unlikely among us as ambassadors of love and compassion. And it is with God’s help that “they,” or should I say, “we” are able to build God’s church in the world. We are the people of the church, and the contribution of each one of us is the life of First United.

Of course, as Paul knew, we cannot do the work of the church all by ourselves and so he prayed for the church in Thessalonica saying, “Knowing all this, we pray continually that God will make you worthy of the call, fulfill all your desires for goodness and empower all your works of faith.” This is my prayer for you and for this congregation. May we all continue to serve God and to build this church surrounded by the saints.