

Who's Your Friend: The Saint
1 Timothy 2:1-7
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So, have you been thinking about your friends? Trying to decide which of the three categories they fall into, sinner, saint, or indifferent? Last Sunday we considered that group of people who might decline an invitation to come to church because they feel somehow unworthy, like they couldn't be holy or righteous enough to join us, or couldn't measure up to what they believe the standards to be. Next week, we'll take a look at those of your friends who simply can't be bothered with church, or religion, or faith, or spiritual matters, the so-called category of the "nones," that's n-o-n-e-s, not n-u-n-s, those who fill in the blank "none" on surveys of religious preference. But for tonight, we'll see what we can learn about those who consider Christianity, or at least church, to be beneath them. We'll call them the saints.

Surely you know some of these people. Surely you've heard their laments that the church has not done a good job living out the values it espouses, values they generally share, mind you. Surely you have watched them observe the church's failures over the years, like clergy sex and child abuse scandals, and not opposing slavery, and the Inquisition, and the Crusades, and all the rest. Surely you have heard their stories of churches that excluded people rather than included them, that spent more on their own luxuries than on the needs of their

communities, that did not reflect the diversity of their own neighborhoods. Yes, the unchurched saints in your circle of friends are not uninterested in church, they just may not want to sully their reputations by hanging out in one. It is not that they are self-righteous. It's just that they aren't blind.

You see, they are not altogether wrong about the church. We've got our problems. In fact, we would do well to take their complaints with great seriousness, not simply in an effort to try to satisfy them and show them that we can do better, but because, by and large, the things they are critiquing are things we ought not to be doing in the first place. Why should they come to a church that acts like a country club, when the country club down the street has a golf course too? Why should they bring their kids to a church that only has white people, when their kids' elementary school is completely multi-racial? I could go on and on, but you probably get the idea. Just like the sinners we talked about last week, who aren't really that different from those of us who already here, the saints are after the same things as we are, and they want to see the church succeed, but they just can't yet see themselves in the pews.

One last thought in describing these saints before moving on. They are ready. They want to be convinced. These are the types that are all of a sudden finding the Pope relevant now that he is finally speaking with a new tone in his voice. I've heard people who haven't darkened the door of a church in years say that they have started going back to church since Pope Francis' election because

they perceive he will change the direction of the church, and bring it in line with what it says it wants to be. And they are responding to that message. So now we know who they are. Short of becoming the Pope, how can we speak to them? Let me suggest that the book of First Timothy might have something to offer.

From the earliest days of Christianity, the new faith was considered a religion of the poor and outcast, like the majority of those who had followed Jesus. Already an odd form of faith because it collected the wretched discards of society, it then added the indignity of its founder's socially-frowned upon form of death, crucifixion, which was reserved for criminals and enemies of the state. Add in the fact that outsiders looking in on the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper saw a bunch of cannibals, and you may wonder how Christianity survived long enough to be coopted by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, and made the fixture of the collection of world religions that it still is today.

Indeed here in 1 Timothy, we see something of the distance between the upper class from the church. Paul doesn't write to Timothy, "Go talk to our friend So-and-So who can pull some strings and help us live a peaceable life." Rather, he has to say, "Pray for kings and all who are in high positions so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life." There was no one to help them out. They had no real allies. All they had were people who could, for the most part, afford to give them no mind, to allow them to be the marginal religion of wretched sinners, while they dedicated themselves to the loftier or lustier goals they might have been pursuing.

But either way, they certainly must have thought, “We are better than the Christians, if the best their leader could do was round up some derelicts before getting executed.” They may not have thought they were better in God’s eyes, but they thought they were better in their own eyes.

But even with all that social distance and being looked down upon, Paul knows that God doesn’t reject these folks for being the rich and un-wretched, and so he can’t either. And so he moves on from simply seeking for the church to be left free from interference to reminding Timothy that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth,” saints and sinners alike. One way to read this passage is to understand that Paul is seeking a quiet and peaceable life for the church so that it can have the time and the space to reach everyone with the knowledge of the truth, “everyone” being the types of people the church generally attracted. But the other way to read it is to understand that Paul is drawing larger the circle of those whom God seeks, to include even those kings and leaders whom he has just mentioned, that it is not enough that they should just leave us alone, but in fact, they ought to join us because God desires everyone to be saved.

Well, the church succeeded in bringing all kinds of people, including the rich and un-wretched, into its midst, and in the fourth century became the official religion of the Roman Empire. And so, for a very long time, Christianity became the religion of the wealthy and powerful, at least in name only. You weren’t going

to get very far in politics or commerce by neglecting the church, and so it was in your best interest to see the church succeed, for it to have the quiet and peaceable life Paul described. You wouldn't find too many people in those days who thought there was a better option for them to pursue their goals for society. There weren't really people looking down on the church, or thinking that they didn't need a church that wasn't living up to the standards it professed. There were some of those people, but they tended to try to reform the church rather than leave it. But for the most part, until just a few centuries ago, you didn't see the dynamic I described earlier, of people who weren't hostile to the church, but thought there was a better way out there somewhere.

But along came capitalism and the gap widened once again between those who couldn't afford to leave the church behind, and those who could, the old wretched class who saw their need for God, and a new class of kings and leaders who did not have to depend on the church for its blessing. There are many historians who have noted the growing similarity between our own times and those of the Roman Empire into which Paul was bringing the Gospel, and this is one of those points of contact: that there is once again a group of people who find, at least in their own minds, that they do not need the church, and often because they believe that they are at least morally equal to, if not ethically superior to, those who claim the religion of Jesus Christ.

And so we can return to Paul's letter to Timothy for a way to speak these old words to a new situation, and a way to invite your saintly friends to this party of sinners we call the church. If there is one word to summarize all the words in this passage, that word must be humility. You see, even if the word humility doesn't actually appear here, what else can Paul be talking about when he says, "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all"? Paul is clear that Jesus Christ, who is in the exalted position of being able to mediate between God and us, to be the conduit for revelation and power and spirit, this same Jesus Christ humbled himself for us, gave himself up to die in that undignified way, to be buried in an afterthought of a tomb, the very opposite of what a regular king would do or demand. Yes, Jesus Christ humbled himself, and if that is the way he accomplished God's goal, it must be the way we accomplish our goal, of being the same kind of herald of the truth Paul says he is, so that all may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

It seems to me appropriate then, when speaking to our saintly, and well meaning friends, to own the failures of the church in a way similar to how I suggested last week we own our own histories of sin. Yes, we've failed in the past, and we'll continue to fail even while doing our best, but at the same time, we recognize something about that mysterious phrase, "the knowledge of the truth." You see, what we know about the truth is that Christ gave himself a ransom for us

whether we succeed or not, whether we live up to his standards or not, whether we humble ourselves sufficiently or not, whether we love as fully as we ought to or not. What we know about the truth is that we can and must find our strength in God, and not ourselves, or in someone else, or even in church. The church will always be only a means to know the truth; it is not and cannot be the truth itself. But the church is the place where we can come to begin to learn our knowledge of the truth, the truth that sets us free, to live, to love, to serve, to overcome our failures.

My hunch is that your friends the saints are as frustrated with every other human institution as they are with the church, and that is because in the end, just like the church, they are human institutions, and our human institutions will never live up to our highest hopes and dreams. My hunch is that you too are sometimes frustrated with the church, whether by church you mean ECF or the church with a capital C. But despite those frustrations, you are here. You have found something of the knowledge of the truth in this gathering of underachieving and frustrating, but hopefully humble and changeable people, and your best way to connect with those saints who express their reservations about coming to church is to share why you still come even though you may be frustrated once in a while. Of course, it is not companionship in frustration for which Christ died, but so that everyone might be saved and come to know the knowledge of the truth. But when we are honest and humble, we open the door to a new way of seeing what God is up to in our

lives and in our church, and whatever frustration we may have entered with will give way to the joy of companionship on the journey to that “quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity,” for which Paul asked Timothy, and us to pray. But it all starts with an invitation, an invitation that you offer from that humble place in your heart, that was created when Christ humbled himself for you. May we share our humility, our faith, and our hope that God will bring us together to do together what we cannot do alone. Amen.