

## GRATEFUL FOR SAINTS AND MENTORS

2 Timothy 1:3-7, 2:1-2

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I am grateful to be a part of a religious tradition that affirms the work of science; the United Church of Christ sees no conflict between science and religion, and in fact, sees many places where the work of each compliments the other. Personally, I'm fascinated by studies that show us the connection between spirituality and health. As we enter this month with our focus on gratitude, let me share with you some scientific research.

When we focus on gratitude, our brain chemistry changes. Specifically, feeling grateful activates the brain stem region that produces dopamine. In another part of our brain, gratitude produces serotonin. Dopamine and serotonin increase our capacity for experiencing joy and well-being. Gratitude also boosts the density of neurons in the front of the brain, actually making us more emotionally intelligent.

So, expressing gratitude is far more than just a nice positive thing to do; it is a practice which contributes to our ability to enjoy life. It begins with a simple question, and this question is especially important to ask yourself when you're feeling discouraged: "What can I find to be grateful for in this circumstance?" Or, "despite this problem in my life, may I call to mind all of my other reasons for gratitude?" Just asking yourself a question like that causes you to begin to feel grateful, shifting your brain chemistry in a positive direction.

So much of our lives consist of choosing to pay attention, and choosing the right things on which to focus.

We can go through our days, vaguely aware that there are people in our lives who are teaching us important things, sporadically paying attention to those people who mean the most

to us. But really stopping and calling to mind all of those people who have made an impact on you — well, that practice can change your life.

How many of you have been to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? You see pictures of all of the individual artists and groups who have been inducted - it's a beautiful display and gives you a sense of the diversity of music - from the roots of rock and roll, rhythm and blues, to punk, grunge, heavy metal, hip-hop, folk, and everything in between. I also love those little individual booths where you can put on headphones and listen to any song from any artist in the museum; you can flip through the genres and the decades and enjoy a huge variety of music.

I'd like to give you a mental assignment this morning. Consider who you would induct into your own spiritual hall of fame. Who are the people who have helped you get in touch with your spiritual side? Who are the people who have shown you what a life of discipleship looks like? Who are the people who seem to have a sense of peace about them, such that you emulate them and hope to become as spiritually mature as they are? Who would be in your hall of fame?

For many of us, our list would include family members - parents, grandparents, who taught us more by example than any other way, sometimes simply by practicing their faith themselves, showing up at church, bringing casseroles to sick neighbors, writing a check each week in worship, beginning mealtimes with prayer. Friends we've met along the way, people with whom we've shared our faith journey. How about people you've never met in person but whose stories have inspired you? This is where Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther and Pope Francis come in. People whose books you've read, who have been able to articulate questions in a particularly helpful way. For me, certainly, and I'm sure for many of you, the people who share these pews with you on a Sunday morning would qualify as saints and mentors. I am continually humbled by the examples I see around me in this church of people who give of themselves without looking for any attention in return. I am constantly trying to learn from the examples of

many of our seniors. I admire their dedication towards living life to the fullest - keeping minds active by reading and attending Bible Study, supporting the church year after year, faithfulness in worship attendance and their sacrificial giving. I see discipleship in parents attentive to their children's needs, not indulgent but unconditionally loving. Some of those children have differing abilities, some of those children are adopted, some of those children are more challenging. My saints are those who give of themselves to siblings who don't have anyone else to care for them, and parents whose needs have become significant. My hall of fame needs a large, large facility. Because the more I look, the more people I see whom I want to add. The husband who so lovingly cared for his wife during her descent into dementia, not just visiting her every day but dressing her in clothes that matched and were never stained, and ever-so-gently putting lipstick on her, even though no one else was coming to see her. I want to add the woman who lives with chronic pain but never complains, and the family that lives paycheck to paycheck but always has room in their home for a lost soul. Foster parents, and those who have lost children but not lost their faith or their ability to help others experience joy.

All of these, and so many I don't have time to mention — they all inspire me to be a better person. They are saints and mentors for me. There's not a single one of them who's perfect because God doesn't make perfect people.

The writer Frederick Buechner says saints are not "plaster statues, men and women of such paralyzing virtue that they never thought a nasty thought or did an evil thing their whole life long." "Saints," Buechner says, "are essentially life givers. To be with them is to become more alive".

Saints are the ones who have shaped and molded you; who loved you with unconditional love and patience, forgiveness and grace; who pushed you to become more than you thought you could be or wanted to be, for that matter; who inspired you by the courage and integrity and

faithfulness of their lives. Your saints are people through whom God worked to make you who you are and who continue to work to make you who you will be.

Some them are extraordinary: the apostles and martyrs, the great towering figures of history. And some are ordinary people; most of them are, in fact.

Teachers, or Scout leaders, or coaches who gave what they had to give to you and saw in you what you could not, at the time, see in yourself. People who called you to work hard, to sacrifice, to give, to love, and inspired you to reach deep inside yourself, helped you to become who you are today.

Or ordinary people who, out of nowhere, suddenly do extraordinarily brave and faithful things: those who walked into the fires of hell itself on September 11 to save lives and never came back out. Police officers who risk their lives every day to make our communities more civil places.

Researchers who spend their intellect and time trying to find cures for diseases.

They're all in the hall of fame.

In our passage for today, Paul says to his friend and colleague Timothy, "When I look at you, Timothy, I see your mother Eunice and your grandmother Lois in you." Paul isn't talking about Timothy's physical characteristics - the color of his eyes or his facial structure. He sees his spiritual ancestry when he looks at Timothy. He reminds Timothy to visit his own hall of fame. "Pay attention to those people who have made you who are; express gratitude to and for them." But there's something more Paul asks Timothy - and us - to do. Realize that we are called to be saints and mentors, too, to those who are around us now and to the next generations. Others are looking to us, watching our example, seeing what they can learn from our lives. So choose your role models well, because their lives will shape yours, and yours will shape someone else's, and in this way the world is changed, for better or worse.

If you are feeling somewhat lost, you may need to induct a few more members into your hall of fame. Don't look for perfect people, but look for those who bring out the best in you. Whose stories inspire you? Talk to those people. Or read what they've written. Just as we don't have to only like one kind of music, we shouldn't have only one or two people on our personal list of saints. Because people will disappoint us, almost always. So find someone you admire because of their kindness, someone who inspires you for their hard work, someone for their risk taking, someone for their ability to pray. Keep on adding people, and then you'll have a whole gallery to visit when you need to be uplifted.

On this All Saints Day, I am giving thanks for the life of my friend and colleague, Rhoda Montgomery. Rhoda died last Sunday afternoon after a battle with cancer. She was an Episcopal priest in Texas whom I met the summer of 2006. We began the Doctor of Ministry program together. She was whip-smart, although she never flaunted that - (in fact I never she knew she'd been her high school valedictorian until I read her obituary this week) and she was one of the funniest people I'd ever met. We became fast friends. She and her husband came here when Doug and I got married. She flew me to Texas to lead a women's retreat at her church in Austin, and we attended several continuing education events together in recent years. She lived her faith her very own way, preaching powerful sermons which also included frequent references to manicures, Diet coke, her shoe collection, and her and her husband's love for big inflatable Christmas decorations. She called her husband Buddy the Elf. I'm remembering Rhoda today because I want someone in my own spiritual hall of fame who reminds me not to take myself too seriously. Joy is one of the gifts God has given us, and I'm grateful to Rhoda for sharing her Texas-sized joy with me.

Friends, let us be grateful for those who have gone before us, who have made us who we are, and let us be mindful that we are called to live our own lives with authenticity, knowing that we are saints and mentors for others who are watching us.

