

FOR ALL THE SAINTS WHO HAVE FORMED US

2 Timothy 1:3-14

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When we in the Protestant Reformed tradition talk about saints, what do we mean, exactly? We're not talking about the superhuman or perfect faith of a select few. Rather, we're talking about God's ability - and God's choice - to use flawed human beings to do divine things. Saints are those people who have helped us to know God's love, encouraged us in a spiritual practice. A saint might be the person who taught you to pray, the one who drove you to Sunday school, your Confirmation mentor, a youth group advisor who listened to you late in the night when you were struggling. A saint is someone who invited you to church or welcomed you here the first time. A saint is someone who accepted your questions and doubts without judgment - or someone who prayed for you when you couldn't find the words yourself.

Our scripture passage for today reminds us that faith happens in relationship. I honestly can't think of anyone I've ever talked to about their spiritual life who has said to me, "I just decided to become a Christian. Never talked to anyone about it." Instead, I hear comments like these: "My grandmother brought me to church" or "My parents encouraged me to pray every night." Or "a college chaplain was there for me when I most needed it." It's always been that way. The book of Second Timothy portrays Paul

as an old man near death. He is sharing a personal word of fondness and encouragement to Timothy, his protege and friend. Paul hasn't just shared faith with Timothy and mentored him - Paul's faith has also been strengthened by his relationship with the younger Timothy. And in this passage we read these eloquent words about how Timothy first received his spiritual nurture - "I'm reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois, then in your mother Eunice..." Timothy has received faith as a sacred heritage, passed down from generation to generation, lovingly preserved and shared.

The Christian faith is not solitary but communal. We learn from one another. We experience God's love through one another's support.

I invited members of our worshiping community to share their stories of saints. Several people mentioned the roles of parents or grandparents - here are a few.

Jim and Cynthia Kitora are leaders in this congregation - they come by it naturally. They actually grew up together in the UCC church in Solon, where their parents led by example. Cynthia wrote this to me: "In terms of saints in our lives, Jim and I were blessed with parents who were saints in helping mold our faith. They led by doing and we observed them over many years. All of our parents volunteered at our church in numerous ways. My Dad would fix things around the church and built a number of items still in use today. My Mom would go in and do the secretarial tasks, and she served

as Treasurer. She founded a turban ministry at the church and they made more than 11,000 turbans for cancer patients. Our Moms sang in the choir. And Jim's dad led it for many years. All four of them would help set up, cook, tear down for events. Jim's Mom Carol led the Trustees several times and was always cooking. And the families also led with their annual pledges. They made sure we attended Sunday school, vacation Bible school, youth groups. And my sisters and I and Jim were always performing in church."

Rich General sent this picture of his mom, and wrote: As a child she would walk by herself to the local church on Sunday. This was the beginning of a lifetime where she kept God as the center of all things. When I was born and grew to adulthood she passed her faith to me. I was so blessed to have her as my Mom."

Elaine Curtiss also cited her mom's influence, writing me this to share: "Having taught me that *God's love for us is the thread that runs through the Bible* from beginning to end, she modeled that kind of unconditional love in her interactions with the people she met, from children to adults. Whenever I would show anxiety over an upcoming test at school or other personal challenge, my Mom reminded me that I was not facing that obstacle alone, but that God, who resided in my heart, would be right there with me every step of the way. *Her quiet confidence and consistent, loving example* have provided the foundation for my walk as a Christian to this day."

This is Penny Simmelink and her grandmother. Penny says, "My grandmother is someone who has been like a saint in my life. Growing up and even today, I continue to be inspired by her faith, love, hopefulness, and compassion. She once told me that whenever I start to feel afraid, to take a breath and then, recite to myself 'The Lord is my shepherd, I will not be afraid.' This timeless advice has never failed to calm me down and give me the perspective I need to get through whatever challenge I am facing."

Some of you here may recognize Bill and Ruth Higgins - parents of Claudia Forbes and Cheryl Updegraff. Their sister Candi wrote, "We were fortunate to have saints in our family in the earthly form of our parents, Bill and Ruth Higgins. Beginning each morning with devotions, they centered their life on God's teachings. They never had to tell us how to live, but showed us by example; caring for their neighbors endlessly, volunteering time and talent to prepare gardens, donate food, transport to medical appointments and fix meals. They also fostered 7 children when their own home was full. They lived out their beliefs always following God's word to love others."

I received this story from a church member who asked that I keep her story anonymous...When you told us about your upcoming sermon, "For All the Saints," I thought of the many friends and family members who have been saints in my life. But there is one friend in particular, who was there to lift me up and carry me through the most difficult time of my life. We have

been friends for many years and shared many adventures together.. and I have no doubt, it was the Lord's work that she was with me when my husband suddenly passed away. She heard from one of my neighbors that there was an ambulance at my house. She knew of a health issue I was having, so she assumed they were attending to me. She meant to call my husband's number to see how I was, but accidentally dialed mine and I told her the tragic news. She met me at the hospital, cried with me, consoled me and prayed with me until my family arrived. That series of circumstances was no accident, but divine intervention..... She was truly my saint sent from God. She continues to always be there for me for me... quietly guiding me spiritually and supporting me with encouraging words. She has given me comfort, peace and the courage to move forward one step at a time. She is always ready to talk, walk, laugh, cry and pray...truly a gift from God."

The last story I will share today is from Chris Spaetzel, in her words: "Growing up I never had any stability or positive role models. My family moved every year, sometimes in the middle of the night. I attended 13 different schools. I watched my mom be abused by my father. No one in my family ever volunteered or truly helped others. It was easy to say my family was dysfunctional. I become a mom at the age of 18. As difficult as this was, I wouldn't have changed a thing! I had only gone to church a few times while growing up, usually on Christmas. I longed for a relationship with God but never really knew how to get there. I always knew there was a

better life out there and wanted to raise a family, surrounded by love and God. I met my husband, Mark Spaetzel at the age of 19. He and his parents, Dick & Dorothy welcomed my daughter, Crystal, and me with open arms. The moment I met them I was surrounded by love. They taught me what family truly means. I finally had a mom and dad who loved me for who I was. They didn't preach or tell me how to do things but led quietly by example. I learned the value of hard work and what it meant to serve others. They showed me this amazing church and all the wonderful, loving members who have also helped guide me along the way. I am honored to have been able to be one of their caretakers, especially at the end of their lives. Holding their hands, saying the Lords Prayer in their final moments with Mark. Dick and Dorothy Spaetzel, you are my Saints. Thank you for everything you have taught me!"

Saints are ordinary people who share their love, their time, their stories in extraordinary ways. May we each be open to ways that we can encourage one another, realizing none of us is perfect, and that real community begins when we're honest with each other about our life journeys. We are nurtured by one another, by God's word, and at God's table. As we prepare to receive the gifts of communion, we remember the way Jesus lived and the meals he shared.