

SAINTS AMONG US
Colossians 3:12-17

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She lives on a street called Sanctuary Lane...and she believes in clothing other people with love. For years she participated in a program called "PJ's From Grandma." This small non-profit organization had one focus: providing a new pair of winter pajamas to any child in northeast Ohio who was in need. The program lasted for years, but ended abruptly when one of the leaders was no longer able to participate. But this need tugged at Marsha, and she couldn't imagine that this ministry would just go away. For years, she had collected pajamas and it filled her with joy to see the beautiful, soft warm pairs of pajamas come into her home. She would deliver them to social service agencies and imagine the delight they would bring to children. So she decided to just continue, all on her own.

She wrote an email at the beginning of this giving season, thanking all of those who have helped her collect pajamas. In 13 years, they have provided nearly 4700 pairs of pajamas. She wrote this: "Last year we helped 385 kids and families..From families living in vans, to homeless shelters, to families who lost jobs..families relocating with nothing but what they had on their backs...We helped shelters, school kids, Blessing House, Haven Center, Resource Mothers, Genesis House kids, Genesis on the Lake.....and whoever needed our help! The stories were endless last year. And it seemed when we had a request for a particular size and gender, God made sure it was on my doorstep the next day..It truly was amazing..."

And so is she. She's one of our saints. One of our many saints. The pajama ministry is just one of several ways Marsha helps the community. She looks for needs, matches the needs with ways she can help, and gives of herself. Every month the Busch Funeral Home company honors one volunteer - last year, Marsha was honored not only as a volunteer of the month, but as the 2021 volunteer of the year. Here she is receiving the award with her granddaughter. It's an honor to know you, Marsha Wisser!

Our scripture passage for today is one of my very favorites. I often read it at weddings and at funerals - it speaks to the heart of the Christian way of life. "Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." This image of clothing - you choose to "put on" these characteristics, these character traits - just as you choose what you will wear every morning. So it's not true, according to this passage, that some people are compassionate and some are not, that some are humble and some are arrogant. Those traits are not innate and unchangeable. Rather, we **choose** how we will behave, we choose how we will act; it's a choice just like choosing which pair of pants or shoes to wear.

If you think of a saint as someone perfect, if you put that person on a pedestal, you're almost certain to be disappointed. Picture the person up on a pedestal, you walk all the way around the person - you look at him from every direction, you get up close and notice everything...no one can survive that kind of scrutiny. All human beings have flaws. How many times have we been disappointed by a public figure? I can think of several examples of people I have used in my sermon illustrations - and then I later learn about some scandal, and make a mental note to not use that person's name

again. We've been let down by politicians, by athletes, by actors and musicians. Sometimes because our expectations were too high, perhaps. Sometimes because they themselves began to think that they were super-human. And sometimes because we all just forget that no one is perfect.

I find it helpful - instead of looking for people to put on a pedestal - to look at stories, individual acts of humility, kindness, generosity. Look at times when someone has been able to overcome their worst impulses and live out of their best ones. We can be inspired by those stories.

I heard someone say last week that holiness and goodness don't exist somewhere beyond the world, waiting for us somehow to earn it or arrive at it. Rather, holiness and goodness are right here in the midst of our world, in the here and now. If we but have the eyes to see it, if we but take the time to notice it.

A saint is someone who is joyous in her faith, who takes God seriously but herself less so.

A saint is someone who is kind to the vulnerable, patient with the harsh, and abiding in prayers for all.

A saint to is someone who is never fully aware of his talents, but who shares those talents with grace, style, and humility.

Saints are those who are steady in their service, always pulling their own weight and the loads of many others.

All those saints, in community, can become a church which lives out justice, loves mercy, and walks humbly with God. A church that follows the way of Christ, a church that loves the poor and believes that God does not want them to stay poor. A

church that loves the oppressed and believes that God does not want them to stay oppressed. A church that loves people so much that it works for change. A church that is in solidarity with all of our neighbors.

I sat in on part of the Mission Team meeting on Tuesday night. I have been to more committee or team or board meetings in my life than I can possibly begin to count, but I really wanted to be in the room as this part of the agenda was discussed - which of our mission partners do we want to give money to this Christmas, and how much to each partner? Do you think all committee meetings are boring? I'm telling you - this one was thrilling. Here's how our Mission Team works. Each person on the team is assigned to a mission partner, so that we stay in close touch with each partner church or social service agency. This time of year, each liaison contacts the mission partner and finds out what their specific unmet needs are. The year-end giving is voted on, and will be approved later by Church Council. The money comes from the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop - thanks to all the saints who donate, shop, work and volunteer there.

I'll publish the list in the Thursday email after it's approved. But here's an example. One of the sober living facilities we support is called Margeau's House, an old farmhouse in Oberlin that houses 18 women in recovery. Margeau's House needs a new roof, and we have the money to provide it. Because we donate our used household items and clothes, because our Thrift Shop staff and volunteers work so hard to make the shop a place people want to spend their time and money, we are able to help provide 18 women with a safe, warm place to spend the winter - so they can find their way to sobriety, back to their families, back to work and school. Is that what saints do? I think so.

I've been in a few meetings in other times and places where people might say - "It's not our job to provide a new roof" or "Why can't other churches pitch in?" But around the table Tuesday night, it was simply a matter of, "They need it. We know they're doing good work. It's the right thing to do." It felt good, putting on those clothes of generosity and compassion.

One writer says this about how to live in a world with so many needs: "Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help immensely. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed for dramatic change is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing. We know that it does not take everyone on Earth to bring justice and peace, but only a small, determined group who will not give up..."

If someone asks you why you go to church, tell them about Marsha. Tell them about Margeau's House. The problems of the world can feel daunting and overwhelming. We're tempted to despair. We're tempted to just give up and focus on our own comforts and pleasures. But despair and self-indulgence wear thin. They erode our sense of joy. A life without hope is not worth living.

I can't do much about poverty, by myself. I can't address substance abuse by myself. But when we come together, we can do saintly things. When we are in solidarity with one another, addressing the pain and inequality of our world, making a

difference, one pair of pajamas at a time, we tap into a sense of meaning that cannot be purchased, cannot be attained any other way.

I want to close with a few words from one of my colleagues. This beautiful soul is Chantal McKinney. She is an Episcopal priest in North Carolina, and she was one of my classmates when I was working on my doctorate. She is involved in a new initiative helping local congregations connect more deeply and closely with their neighborhoods through acts of loving kindness. She recently wrote this - "If you want to grow your church, show your wounds, your painful vulnerabilities. Tell them about how you suffered and hurt, and yet Christ raised you up from the bottom. Lean into your brokenness. Show them your cracks. Let the Christ light shine through them so brightly that some may wince. It can be hard for a perfect church to draw broken people to them. Jesus came for the broken, the sick, the wounded, the lost. Be love in the world. Get to know your neighbors. Cultivate belonging with a spirit of love. Let love be your guide. Lead with the heart, and then - without even aiming for it - you will grow in the way God desires." Amen and amen.