
How Do You Become a Saint?

**An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Feast of St. Philip and St. James, Apostles**

The name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Did you ever wonder how you become a saint? It's not clear to me just by looking at the lives of James and Philip that we know. If we just look at their lives and their ministry, it's not clear how to answer that question.

Take James for example. James, or somebody named James, is mentioned at least eight times in the New Testament. But if you sift through those references, most scholars agree to only three people. James the Greater, who was probably one of the sons of Thunder, the brother of John, son of Zebedee. James the Less or Younger or Minor, and James the Just who was the brother of Jesus, probably the first Bishop of Jerusalem, and may have written the epistle, the Letter of James. But the James that we are to celebrate today is James the Less.

You know what we know about James the Less? He's listed twice as being an apostle. That's it.

So, let's go to Philip. Philip the Apostle, not to be confused with Philip the Deacon, whom we will celebrate later, appears only in the list of Apostles and in several other points of the Gospel of John.

He is the one who enthusiastically followed Jesus and then brought his friend Nathaniel. He is the one that the Greeks approached first when they wanted to see Jesus. So, maybe there was something about him that seemed like he was accessible. He was the one at the Last Supper who said, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." And he was the one before the feeding of the 5,000 that Jesus turned to and said, "Philip, where can we buy enough bread?"

Now, the Scholars think that Jesus was just using Philip to make a point because the feeding occurred just outside of Bethsaida where Philip was from.

So, when you think about it, we don't really get an answer to our question from the story of Philip either.

Or, do we? Could it be that the lives of James and Philip do show us how to become a saint?

But not because they're a hero, not because they're the center of the story, not because they had dramatic displays of courage or greatness or insight or creativity, but just because they followed Jesus.

What if it's enough just to stand where Jesus stood, say what Jesus said, do what Jesus did, and be real? What if that's the essence of being a saint? What if it's enough just to get out of the way long enough for Christ to work in us?

To illustrate this, I want to tell you a story about a young Baptist preacher. His name is Jeffrey Brown, and he moved to Boston in the early 1990s, wanting what all young preachers want, a huge megachurch, a fancy office, a late model fast car, a worldwide TV ministry and fame. You know that's that servant thing.

But then something happened to Jeffrey Brown. First, he had a dream. Jesus appeared to him in a dream, wearing an orange suit, a red shirt, and a purple tie. Must have been an Episcopalian.

And he took Jeffrey Brown to this magnificent office in this mansion on the hill with richly appointed rooms, and

then he took Jeffrey Brown and gave him a ride in a brand new Mercedes. And then he took Jeffrey Brown to a nave full of people in a massive megachurch. And then he looked at Jeffrey Brown and he said, "What do you think?" And Jeffrey Brown said, "It's a lot." And Jesus said, "Is it me?" And Brown said, "No." And Jesus said, "It's not you either."

Then another thing happened, Jeffrey Brown's church was just on the outskirts of a neighborhood which had been suffering from gang violence. And one night a young man was killed right on the steps of the church. Somebody had wanted his leather jacket and he wouldn't give it up, and he paid for it with his life. Jeffrey Brown was asked to give the sermon for the funeral. "Say something," they said, "which will restore peace." "Say something," they said, "which will bring about order." "Say something," they said, "which will reestablish authority."

Jeffrey Brown did not know what to say, but after the funeral, he gathered the ministers together from the neighborhood and he said, "We've got to do something." And they did what ministers always do, they talked about it. And then they do the other thing ministers always do, they formed committees to talk about it. And then finally Jeffrey Brown said, "You know, Christ is not here, Christ is on the street."

And so, they went out into the streets at night just to meet people, to introduce themselves to people, to get to know the people that lived there. They didn't tell them what to do. They didn't offer any fantastic witness. They were just present. They were just present.

Brown tells a story of one man who kept coming up to him, rubbing his arm and saying, "Wow, that coat is made of silk." And Brown would say, "It's not silk." And this happened again and again and again, and finally Brown got mad and he looked at him and he shouted, "It's not silk!" And the young man smiled. And he said, "Oh, so now you're real. You're not here playing a character anymore. You're here being real with us." Standing where Jesus stood, saying what Jesus said, doing what Jesus did, getting out of the way long enough for Christ to work in him.

Now, Jeffrey Brown never got his megachurch. He never got a fancy office. He never got a fast late model car, but he was able to help negotiate a reduction in violence. He was able to help negotiate some cooperation among the gangs because he, unlike those who had proceeded him, knew that you will only have community and peace if everybody is part of the solution. When they made the gangs part of the solution, they started to get somewhere.

Now, Jeffrey Brown's story is actually a class at Harvard, and the professor who teaches that course says that every year Jeffrey Brown comes to meet the class and he walks in in blue jeans, a white buttoned-down shirt, and a sharp looking blazer.

He speaks in a calm, resonant voice. He's honest, yet humble, confident, yet strong. He never rushes, he's not afraid of silence. And as a result, it's clear he's real. He's present, he's there. And the professor said, "Because of his presence, we feel God's presence." He is standing where Jesus stood, saying what Jesus said, doing what Jesus did.

Maybe that's how you become a saint, not because you're a hero, not because the story is about you, but because we got out of the way enough for Christ to work in us, having the courage and commitment to stand where Jesus stood, say what Jesus said, and do what Jesus did. It's my belief that that is what James did, and that is what Philip did, and that is why we are celebrating them here today.

Amen.