

November 2nd, 2025

Ephesians 1:11-23 “Practice Hope”

What does it take to be a saint these days? I know sometimes when we do a random act of kindness or take a burden off someone's shoulders, they'll say, “Thank you. You're a saint!” Okay. Let's see what it takes. Here are the Catholic Church's requirements for sainthood.

Step One – You have to be dead. And you can't become a saint right after you died either, you have to be dead at least five years before you are “canonized” which is what it's called when you become a saint.

Step Two – You must be investigated by a committee led by your area's bishop. They examine your life, your writings and your “reputation for holiness.” I like that phrase. Witnesses are interviewed and documents and writings are collected. I wonder if that includes social media posts these days? Anyway, if you pass the test, a committee sends their recommendation for sainthood to a committee in the Vatican's *Dicastery for the Causes of Saints*. Once the Vatican accepts the cause for consideration, the person receives the title “Servant of God.”

Step Three - At the Vatican, theologians and cardinals study the evidence that the committee gathered to determine whether the person lived a life of “heroic virtue” or if they died as a martyr for the faith. Once the Pope agrees with the committee, the cardinals, and the theologians, the person is declared “Venerable.” This means the Church recognizes that the person indeed lived a life of extraordinary Christian virtue but has not yet been *publicly* venerated.

Step Four – Here's where it gets interesting. To move from Venerable to Blessed, you've got to have at least one miracle under your belt. Except if you were martyred. Then you can get away without having performed a miracle. The miracle is usually a medically inexplicable healing that occurred after the candidate's intercessory prayers. Then the miracle must pass scientific and theological investigation — doctors and

theologians must confirm that there's no natural explanation and that it's clearly linked to the candidate's prayers. Once confirmed, the Pope *beatifies* the person, granting them the title "Blessed." See, we're leveling up here!

Step Five - To be declared a *saint* of the Church, you have to have *two* miracles under your belt. And that second miracle has to be verified in the same way as the first. When the second miracle is approved, the Pope formally canonizes the person in a public Mass. The person is then officially recognized as a Saint, worthy of universal veneration. And here's the best part – you get your own feast day that is celebrated throughout the Church. The feast isn't on the saint's birthday, but on the day after their death, or what's known as their "heavenly birthday."

So, if someone says, "Oh, Tom you're a saint" or "Oh Lori, you're a saint" you can either humbly say, "No, far be it from the truth" or you can say, "I wish!" because – wow – your own feast day! Too bad I have to be dead because I'd love to come up with the menu for my feast day!

So what about us Protestants? We, in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have a different way of determining sainthood. And of course, it's going to be "easier." As a denomination, we are often criticized for being too "easy" or "wishy-washy." This past week, I talked to a person who said that before I came to the church someone left in a huff because they thought "Agree to differ, resolve to love, unite to serve," one of our core value mottos, was too weak. I asked, "Why did they find this *so* offensive that they'd quit the church?" Well, this person believed that "If you can't stand up for something, you'll fall for anything." In other words, you should *never* agree to differ. Okay. Well, I hope the door didn't hit them on their way out. But now *my* sin and judgy-bits are showing because it breaks the "resolve to love" mandate. And you know, I wonder what they'd think of "all means all!" Whew!

Anyway, as Disciples, we believe in the "priesthood of all believers." It's our way of saying that ministry belongs to *all* of us, not just a few. If

that's true, then maybe sainthood begins not with extraordinary people, but with ordinary believers faithfully following Christ. Let's run with that a bit. We don't observe a formal "All Saints Day" liturgy like other churches, but here's part of one that I found and I think it reflects our understanding of what it means to be a saint –

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. God calls us to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Most of this liturgy is inspired by the book of Hebrews, but I like, “God calls us to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of Jesus.” I would add “in every time” along with “every place.” Okay, then who is this “great cloud of witnesses?” It's the saints who have gone on before us. It's the ones who have set an example for those of us who remain.

Let me tell you about a saint I once knew. When people in our tradition receive a call to ministry, they become “candidates” and are put under care of a committee of ministers and lay people who help the candidate complete the requirements to become an ordained pastor, chaplain, evangelist, mission partner, counselor or spiritual director. When I was taken under care in the Virginia Region for the Disciples of Christ, I was assigned a mentor who would supervise me in the church I served. My mentor was the Reverend Jack Musick. When I served as pastor of the First Christian Church in Pearisburg, Jack was just down the road at the First Christian Church in Narrows. He had been in the ministry for decades and was nearing retirement. Jack figured that FCC Narrows would be the last church he'd serve before retirement, so he decided that he was going to go out with a bang – that he wasn't going to put up with any of the typical church games or what he called “ecclesiastical tiddley-winks.” He said that he was going to be a Psalm 50 verse 9 pastor. I said,

“What’s that?” He said, “That’s when God told Israel, ‘I shall accept no bull from your house.’” And then he’d cackle at his own joke.

Some folks on the clergy committee were reluctant to put me under Jack’s care. He didn’t have a Master of Divinity Degree which was a requirement for ordination in the Disciples. But he was ordained before that requirement, so he was one of the “old timers” who were grandfathered in. The more refined, sophisticated, well-educated members of the committee were concerned that his lack of education would be detrimental. They wanted someone who was more educated and well-versed in the history and polity of our fine denomination. But someone on the committee laughed and said, “Oh no. I think Jack would be the perfect mentor for Jesse. He’ll get all the history, polity, and theology he needs in seminary. He needs to know what it takes to be a *pastor*, and Jack Musick is the guy to do that.” So they voted to put me in Jack’s tender care.

I’ve spoken about Jack before, but since many of you don’t know him, let me fill you in on some of the details. Jack received his call to ministry when he was a hard-living, hard-drinking truck driver. He smoked like a chimney, spiced his language with colorful metaphors, broke all sorts of rules and social norms when it comes to what people consider “proper church etiquette.” He called me “boy” which you can’t get away with in this day and age, but he was a relic of a bygone era. I’d meet with him once a week in his office. He’d say, “Boy, whatchoo preaching about this week?” I’d tell him the scripture I chose and what my point was going to be. He’d usually say something like, “That’s good. If you can’t say what your sermon is about in one sentence you shouldn’t preach it.” Then he’d pull out *his* sermon and ask me what I thought of it. At first, I wasn’t sure how to respond because I thought maybe he was testing me or something. Nope! He just wanted to bounce it off me to see if I thought it was any good.

The most valuable things I received from Jack were his patience, his understanding, and his willingness to be a steady presence in my life and

ministry. Oh, and his Jack-isms. These were little bits of folksy wisdom that he'd pass on to me "so they don't run you out of the church."

I know for a fact that Jack wouldn't make it past step one of what it takes to be a saint in the Catholic Church. But in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Virginia and North Carolina he was a beloved saint, and I was blessed to have him in my life for thirteen years. He talks to me quite a bit when I go out on one of my solo kayaking and camping trips. Whenever I struggle with my call to ministry or whenever I doubt myself or my decisions, I hear one of his "Jack-isms" like, "Boy, you've got to quit thinking you can save everyone. That's God's job, not yours. You just lead them along the way and remember that you can't put into a person's mind with reason what reason didn't put there in the first place. Just love them like Jesus would and let God do the rest."

As we call out those who have died in this past year, it's okay to shed tears and feel grief as we acknowledge the reality of our mortality. But let's remember that death is only half the story. Jack died on January 15, 2005. He is one of the many saints that have gone on to be a part of the "cloud of witnesses" that are an integral part of the church past, present, and future. Had he been canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church his feast day would be January 16.

Jack's feast would have been full of laughter, grace, and more than a little fried chicken and sweet tea — and I think that's just right. Because sainthood isn't a prize for the perfect; it's a calling for the faithful. The saints we remember today — and the ones sitting all around us — are not distant heroes carved in stained glass. They're people who practiced hope when hope was hard. So go and practice hope. Keep showing up, keep loving people, keep trusting that God is still writing the story. Because when you do that, you join the saints — not someday, but right now.