

I don't know about you, but it seems as though any time I need my computer for anything important, something happens! Either the internet is working at a snail's pace, or the printer refuses to print, or something I've been working on disappears. In fact, as I worked on this sermon, the computer arbitrarily changed all the margins on me. And I wasted 20 minutes trying to get that straightened out! It can be very frustrating!

Well, the next time you have trouble surfing the net or using the computer, spiritual help could be at hand. In answer to the prayers of many internet users who have just crashed, the Vatican is considering giving the internet its own patron saint. I hear that one of the top choices is St. Isidore of Seville, who died in the 1400s. This Spanish saint was probably one of the most learned men of his era. If nothing else, he was an influential advocate of education in the Middle Ages. And, he is credited with creating the world's first database—a 20-volume encyclopedia—that was all written by the old tried-and-true method—by hand! For his efforts, St. Isidore has been placed on the short list of spiritual superstars being considered for the role of patron saint of the Internet. And why not? Pasta eaters have their own patron saint. So do tax collectors, beggars, seekers of lost causes, students, and people with sore throats or troubled marriages. I know we Protestants don't have these types of saints, but maybe the time has come for a certified cyber-saint.

There are some folks who object to attaching a saint from the past to technology of the present. They suggest finding a modern figure. How about—St. Gates of Microsoft? Naaah!

So just who is a saint? Today's passage from Mark drops a few hints. Someone asks Jesus what is the greatest commandment, and Jesus responds by citing the Shema—"Hear O Israel...you shall love the Lord your God"—and adding "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:29-31). When the questioner shows respect for Jesus' opinion and approves of Jesus' answer, Jesus says, "You are not far from the kingdom." (v.34). In other words, you are not far from grasping the Good News I've come to bring. Even though this curious questioner is not a bona fide, official, one-of-the-twelve disciples, he is able to grasp and accept the truth of Jesus' teaching.

Sounds like God is on a saint search, looking for people who can figure out his kingdom. Qualifications seem to be acknowledging that God is the one true God, and then showing love that flows toward God and toward our neighbors. A saint is not necessarily a scholarly superstar like Saint Isidore of Seville—instead, a saint is a simple person who lives out devotion to both God and other people.

But can we pick them out in a crowd? Not necessarily, at least not at first glance. For instance, back in the 1920's, a woman who lived a rather Bohemian life in New York's Greenwich Village, (that included an abortion, a divorce, and then a child out of wedlock) found her way back to God in the Catholic Church. After she became involved in a church, she made it her mission to reach out to the poor, the needy, and the desperate. If you overlooked her life-style issues, she was a real crusader for social justice. No matter how un-shocking some of her life-style might be for us in 2019, she was definitely not your standard-issue saint for any time!

But believe it or not, her name has been processed at the Vatican. I'm not kidding! This woman, Dorothy Day, lived one of the most highly-regarded lives in the 20th Century Church. You see, during the depression, Dorothy set up a network of soup kitchens where people could come and eat and sleep. Her efforts soon spread around the nation. Dorothy never wanted accolades or attempts to portray her work as anything but ordinary—merely what any true Christian would do. She saw herself as a simple woman seeking to live out the gospel—a person who demonstrated nothing more than loving both God and neighbor.

It seems God reached deep into the most desperate parts of a city and came up with Dorothy Day, a woman that the archbishop of New York recently called "a model for all third millennium Christians."

But wait a second—not everyone’s a saint. In fact, many are far from it. There are definitely people who seem to be a long way from the kingdom, or at least on a significant detour. How did they lose their way? And how can they find their way back?

Let’s face it, some folks get lost because they haven’t received good directions from earthly parents or haven’t learned how to listen for guidance from God—or others. Many stray because their judgment is clouded—they might have been driving while drugged, drunk or debilitated. Others race after big thrills and big money, and risk losing their hearts, souls and minds in the process.

But I believe there is always hope because God is always saint-searching. The writer Kathleen Norris tells the story of a guy named Willie, who had fallen in with a drug dealer and dreamed up a scheme to make some truly big bucks. Willie thought things were working out just fine. But, one day when he and his friend were driving through the city streets, his partner reached under his front seat and brought out a loaded gun to kill a rival drug dealer who just happened to be walking down the street.

It was right then that Willie decided that he was in over his head and needed to get out. And that, writes Kathleen Norris, is where change/salvation begins—in the sudden awareness that a particular path is leading to death—or nowhere good. It’s the awareness to name something as “wrong” and then take steps to turn away from it. And that is exactly what is going on in the unexpected and astounding action of God to free people from whatever is holding them in bondage.

The way back to the right path—the kingdom path—always begins at the very same place—at the point where God reaches across miles and missteps and a multitude of messy mortal mistakes, at the point where Jesus wraps his arms around the shoulders of wandering souls and gently guides them back. Jesus doesn’t discard people because they’re moving down an imperfect path. Nor does he disqualify people who have made a mess of their lives before finding the right road—and neither should we. Thank goodness that a woman like Dorothy Day wasn’t locked out of the kingdom path—or all the people she fed and helped would not have been. It’s not up to us to tell God who God can use in special ways to do wonderful things.

God is on a saint search, and it’s not only perfect people who are going to be found. Sure, there are some who seem to be born with the natural ability to be perfect Christians and love the Lord 24/7/365 no problems, no questions asked. But for most of us, this love and power comes only after we discover that God has always loved us, that his love precedes our own, and that we are given second, third, fourth, multitudes of chances to find our way back to God’s arms.

All he asks—as Jesus said, is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—and show a willingness to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The table this morning is a way of showing us that God reaches out for us—that there is no limit to what God will do to reach us. When you partake of the bread and cup, remember that you are God’s beloved child, that God has called you to be his holy one, set apart for his service.

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Garo and Bobbi.