

“I Mean to Be One, Too.”

We like to sing songs about saints. For example, “I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true, who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew...” or how about “When the saints go marching in, or when the saints go marching in...” We also like to honor saints by naming things after them such as schools, churches, hospitals, and even football teams. People wear medals to remember saints that are important to them. People make pilgrimage to visit places where saints lived or did special deeds such as Assisi, Monte Casino, and Lourdes. We also have icons of saints to remind us what they did and help us to pray like they did.

With all of the fuss we make about saints we must think they are very special people. The dictionary defines a saint as a person who has been picked by the church as someone who was particularly virtuous. The dictionary also says a saint can be someone who has died and gone to heaven. When the Apostle Paul talked about saints he used the word to mean every person who believed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ.

If you were here on Wednesday you heard me talk about another group of people whom I call “everyday saints.” These are people who were not nearly as heroic and as widely remembered as St. Francis, St. Theresa of Avila, or St. Catherine of Siena. For example, within this parish an everyday saint was Jean Gold. While I did not know Ms. Gold many people have told me of her devotion to God and her acts of kindness to people in this parish and beyond.

I would like to tell you about an everyday saint that inspires my faith. Her name was Martha Elizabeth McCalley Chinn, but everyone called her Mattie, Mattie-Mae or Miss Mattie.

Miss Mattie taught elementary school in rural Virginia. She expected a lot out of her students, and was known for grading hard. I imagine that her students were more likely to get a C than any other grade. She did not grade hard because she thought her students were stupid. Rather she wanted to draw the best out of them. Despite her tough grading her students loved her. I think it is because she respected them and didn't look down on them just because they were poor, and most of them were **very** poor.

A good part of her teaching career was during the Great Depression. The children she taught were the sons and daughters of farmers and laborers. Their parents did not have a lot of money when times were good, and much of the time they just scraped by. Many did not have food other than what they could grow. Their clothes often had patch on top of patch. They did anything necessary to hold their clothes and their lives together.

A lot of kids would come to school for the month of September and then go to work on the farm to harvest the crops in October. They would come back to school weeks later, and try to catch up on their studies. It was hard for them and for their teacher. It was even harder because it was a one-room

schoolhouse, which meant that there were kids from first grade through sixth grade all in the same room. How Miss Mattie kept up with who was learning what and made sure everyone was making progress is beyond me. But she did it.

Miss Mattie also knew which of her students did not have food to eat or decent clothes to wear. Her family was also just scraping by, but she would be sure to bring a sandwich or two, some pears from her tree in the backyard, or something from her garden for those children who did not have lunch. When she saw a child with ragged clothes, she would bring that child clothing that belonged to one of her four children. She made sure her students were not too hungry to learn or so poorly clothed that they were ashamed to come to school.

I heard that a lot of people loved and respected Miss Mattie. In fact many people treated her like a saint. I heard how good a teacher she was, but no one ever told me about how she clothed and fed her students. I did not know these stories until many years after her death. Her acts of compassion were a revelation to me.

I loved Miss Mattie too. I would have loved her no matter what, because she was my grandmother. Knowing what I know about her now, I can see why so many people treated her like a saint, because she is one. My grandmother lived the Gospel of Jesus, because she did not know how to do anything else.

My guess is you have saints like Miss Mattie in your life, too. The truth is we are surrounded by saints. We are surrounded by saints in this very room. These are people loving God and Jesus and living the Gospel as best they know how. On this All Saints' Sunday remember all of the saints in your life, the ones who have gone before you, the ones who surround you at this very moment, and think of the ones who are to come after you.

As the hymn says

“They lived not only in ages past;  
there are hundreds of thousands still;  
the world is bright with the joyous saints  
who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,  
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;  
for the saints of God are just folk like [we],  
and [you know we can be ones] too.”