

Practically Perfect

^{NRS} Psa 34:1 <Of David, when he feigned madness before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away.> I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. ² My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be glad. ³ O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. ⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵ Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶ This poor soul cried, and was heard by the LORD, and was saved from every trouble. ⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸ O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. ⁹ O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. ¹⁰ The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.

^{NRS} Psa 34:22 The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

When I was a boy, I remember one summer I saw one of the older kids in the neighborhood crouching down holding a magnifying glass. I wondered what on earth it was he was looking at he was staring so intently. Well, it turned out he wasn't actually using the magnifying glass to magnify things- he was using it to focus the light from the sun. The Texas sun was already really hot in the summer, and then if you hold a magnifying glass close to the ground, you can focus it's rays on something like a leaf, say, and you can make it really, really hot- hot enough to burn within just a few seconds.

Well, after watching him for just a little bit I was completely enraptured. And after a while, when he was getting a little bored, I saw my opportunity, and I asked him for a turn. And he looked at me for a little bit before handing over the prized tool. Then, as he handed over the magnifying glass into my hands, he had this incredibly serious expression on his face, and he told me I had to be very careful, because, and these were his exact words, because I was *magnifying the power of the sun*.

Magnifying the power of the sun. Wow. This was serious business. And then I remember taking the magnifying glass in my trembling hands, stooping down, and focusing a tiny glowing ball of light onto a crisp, brown leaf, and seeing a hole begin to burn, and smelling that sharp leaf smoke smell as it curled into the air and into my nose. And I felt like the most powerful kid in the universe. For in my hands I knew the power of the sun.

Now in case you're worried about the fire risk, I'm sure there was some risk, but we were never really able to get a leaf actually ignite into flame, though it wasn't for lack of trying. No the leaves were more like a cigarettes, burning slowly and steadily until the whole is consumed, but without any flame. And if you're wondering about bugs, I will also admit we did try to fry some ants, but honestly it's much harder than I would have guessed. It turns out ants move pretty quickly, and at least in Texas- they bite. So my friend and I pretty much stuck to burning old leaves by magnifying the power of the sun.

“O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.” This is what we hear in Psalm 34. Magnify the Lord! Magnify. In both Greek and Hebrew the words for magnification literally mean to enlarge, to make something that's hard to see, much, much easier to see. Only in Scripture, it's a different kind of son we're talking about magnifying. Texts like Psalm 34 exhort us to lift up the magnifying glass of our lives that we might magnify God- that we might somehow, with some part of us, give off enough light that it makes it easier for others to see, or feel, or trust in the presence of God.

Magnifying God- what an image! That we are called to be people who reflect and even magnify the presence of God, that when people encounter us they walk away more able to believe in God's love.

This is such a better image for us than the image I feel like the church is stuck with most of the time. Most of the time when I hang around church people, I get the feeling we're supposed to be more like exterminators than magnifiers. Like the job of the church is to go around and look down at the world- and to tell people, "You shouldn't read that," or "You shouldn't think that." Like it's our job to be God's exterminators trying to get rid of things we don't like.

But this image of magnification- it's totally different. When we magnify God- we're not concerned with what's wrong with the world; we're completely focused on what's right, what's beautiful about God. Can you imagine if Christians were known not as people who want to argue scripture and bully everyone around us until they see the world just like we do, or people who talk and act one way on Sunday and then a completely different way the rest of the week- but if the church was known as something that magnifies God, people who you just want to be around because we give off such a sense of love and passion and hope?

But it's not just the church that is summoned to magnify God- this would let us off the hook too easily. No, each one of us is called to this. Each one of us is called to magnify the love of God. And when we are magnifying God, when we are radiating love, scripture has a name for us- we are called the *hagios*, the holy ones, the saints. But I'm guessing this is where most of us kind of run into a brick wall. All Saint's day was

yesterday- and we're following the lectionary from it. But even though in scripture it's clear that being a saint is God's dream for all, and even though as Protestants we name hospitals things like "All Saints"...I don't many of us really believe this in our hearts. Most of us cringe a little at the word saint.

No the term saint is definitely one of those words the church has mangled so much that sometimes I wonder if we shouldn't just declare it dead and come up with a new one. When most of us think about what a saint is- we imagine someone who is so good, perfect- they just aren't even human anymore. And sometimes we look up to them, but we sneer at them a little, too. We say someone is a saint if they put up with abuse we know WE would never suffer. Like a saint is kind of synonymous with an idiotic doormat.

And all of this is so sad to me, because it has nothing to do with what it actually means to be a saint. What's a saint? A saint is someone who allows some part of their life to magnify God. A saint is a screwed up, flawed human being, who gets mad, who makes mistakes AND who still persists in holding part of their little life up to God in a way that gives off some light.

Saints are not people who someone escape from all the mess that you and I are stuck with, and, having escaped it, then can kind of pretend to be perfect and say they magnify God. And by the way aren't we lucky for knowing them? No, saints are people weighed down by everything you and I are, they are people with too much to do, and people with inner demons and often rough, ROUGH, edges. But they live with these parts of themselves, and realize these imperfections simply aren't enough to keep God from working through them. They are people who simply have the audacity to just keep

holding their lives before God whether they feel like it or not, whether they are even experiencing God's presence or not, and live in the hope that God's light will enough in the thick darkness gathering around us.

Saints are not people who are perfect. More like Mary Poppins they are people who know it's enough to be *practically* perfect, meaning not perfect at all but close enough- who live in the hope that the good of their lives will outweigh the bad in the end.

The Scripture helps us see this. See, the people who talk about magnifying God in Scripture, they are far from perfect people, and we mainly hear this image when things aren't going all that well. This psalm for instance- the context is a terrible point in David's life, King David being one of the least perfect people in all of scripture.

At this point he wasn't yet king; he has been fighting for King Saul, and he was doing really well- too well, actually. The crowds were absolutely in love with him, the young people chanting "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands." And Saul was getting more and more furious as the days went by- until finally he decided was enough was enough and ordered David to be put to death. So David flees. But, not really thinking about where he's going, he ends up in Philistine territory. And he ends up captured by the servants of the king, who has heard the song and who, with a dark smile, sees David as the next king of Israel, if not the real king. And David realizes he's gone from the frying pan into the fire- he's gone from Saul who wants to kill him, to the king of the Philistines who would like nothing more than to have the head of Israel's king. And so David feigns madness- he writes crazy signs on the doors and the ground, and he lets his spit run all over his beard. And he becomes such a pitiful sight, the Philistine

king says, “Do I not have enough madmen that I need another?” And David escapes by the hair of his slobbery chinny, chin, chin. But, his life a mess, with absolutely no plans for the future- this is the moment when David says his life, *his* life is able to magnify God and to radiate God’s love. David is a saint not because he’s perfect, but because he holds his life up to God in spite of terribly imperfection.

In the Gospel of Luke we hear this image from the mouth of a terrified young girl. Mary, the mother of Jesus- not even married, not even going steady with anyone really, and she turns up pregnant. Can you imagine? It’s bad news today- it’s a death sentence back then. But in this terrible, dark time, when everything has gone so terribly wrong and she’s feverishly thinking about what she’s going to do, when she’s pacing back and forth and her mind is racing and her heart is beating like it’s going to beat out of her chest- she finally comes to a place where she says you know what, it is what it is. And she comes to that blessed point, that blessed still point where she says no matter what anyone else thinks about me, I know I’m a child of God and will get through this, and she cries out, “My soul magnifies the Lord. Let it be with me according to your will.” She doesn’t say my soul will magnify the lord- like when I get through this and figure out how to make myself seem perfect again- THEN my soul will magnify the Lord. No. It’s present tense. My soul magnifies the Lord. Even then- even in the middle of all that. Mary is a saint not because her life is perfect. She is a saint because she holds her life up to God in spite of how imperfect everything is.

Maybe the most famous saint of our own day is Mother Theresa- technically I know she's not a saint, but whenever people want to bring up someone who seems impossibly perfect, Mother Teresa is a favorite pick.

And she's a good choice. Born in Albania in 1910, she took orders as a young woman and was sent to India. There she was a good nun, but nothing out of the ordinary. Then, on a retreat in Darjheeling, she received the call to dedicate her life to the poorest of the poor in India. And she said she just knew that to disobey this voice would be to go against God, go against the deepest part of herself. And so in 1950 she started a school for the most destitute. The rest of her life is legend, caring for abandoned children, for lepers, for those any reasonable person would give up on- she always trusted in God's possibilities in these impossible lives. And no surprise that anyone who spends just a minute or two contemplating her life feels the enormous light radiating from her tiny body. If any of us today could be seem perfect enough to be called a saint, if any of us magnify God in our lives, it's got to be someone like her, right?

And I totally agree with this, but the most exciting thing to me about Teresa isn't this kind of stained glass popular version of her- it's the version that just came out a year ago. A year ago Teresa's private letters, the letters she wrote back and forth to the people she trusted most in life- these were published by Brian Kolodiejchuck, the priest supporting Teresa's bid to be recognized officially as a saint. The letters, published in a book called Come Be My Light, caused an enormous stir. Because this saint, this perfect person- admits in letter after letter how far from perfect her life really was. Even as she started her real ministry in 1948, she was stricken with a terrible, spiritual darkness- a sense of God's absence in her life that never, ever abated, no matter how the rest of us

saw her. She writes: “The place of God in my soul is blank. There is no God in me. When the pain of longing is so great I just long and long for God- and then it is that I feel He does not want me and is not there. Heaven. Souls. Why are these just words, words that mean nothing to me. My very life seems like a contradiction. I help souls- but to go where? The torture and the pain I can’t explain. From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament- but this too has gone. I feel nothing before Jesus- and yet I would not miss Holy Communion for anything.” (p. 210)

Surprising, isn’t it? This woman who seems to be the very epitome of the spiritual master, a woman who dedicated her life to following after the way of Jesus Christ- but inside her soul felt dry, God more of an idea, a concept, than a living relationship.

And yet. And yet! She didn’t stop what she was doing- she didn’t say well if I can’t be perfect, I may as well not try. No, like all saints, the more aware she became of her brokenness, the more committed herself to the few places she knew she could magnify and radiate God.

Mother Teresa was not perfect. Saints are not perfect. Saints are people weighed down by everything you and I are, they are people with too much to do, and people with inner demons and often rough, ROUGH, edges. But Saints deal with this, and trust that their imperfections aren’t enough to keep God from working through them. And so they are people who just keep holding their lives up before God whether they feel like it or not, whether they are even experiencing God’s presence or not, and live in the hope that God’s light is enough in the thick darkness gathering around us.

The priest who published Teresa's letters closed the book with Teresa's favorite memory. I would have guessed it was from her time in India- but it was actually earlier than this, when she visited Australia. She writes: "I will never forget the first time I went to Bourke and visited the sisters. We went to the outskirts of Bourke. There was a big reserve where all the Aborigines were living those little small shacks made of tin and old cardboard and so on...I entered a room and I told the man living there, 'Please allow me to make your bed, to wash your clothes, to clean your room.'" And he kept on saying, "I'm all right, I'm all right." And I said to him, "But you will be more all right if you allow me to do it." Finally he allowed me. Then, when I was done he pulled out from his pocket an old envelope, and one more envelope inside of it, and one more envelope of that one. He started opening one after the other, and right inside there was a little photograph of his father and he gave me that to look at. I looked at the photo and I looked at him and I said, "You, you are so like your father." He was so overjoyed that I could see the resemblance of his father on his face. I blessed the picture and I gave it back to him, and again one envelope, second envelope, third envelope, and the photo went back again in the pocket near his heart. When I was cleaning I saw in the corner of the room a big lamp full of dirt, and I then said, "Don't you light this lamp, such a beautiful lamp. Don't you light it?" He replied 'For whom?' Months and months and months nobody has ever come to me. For whom will I light it? So I said, "Would you light it for the sisters?" And he said, 'Yes'. So the sisters started going to him and *they* started lighting the lamp. After some time *he* got into the habit of lighting it. Many, many years later, I forgot completely about this man, but one day he sent word- "Tell Mother Teresa, my friend, the light she lit in my life is still burning." (P. 340)

Beloved, you are the saints. You are. And God is calling you this week to spend less time on all the things you aren't, all the ways you have made mistakes, that you might discern the part of you that is beautiful, the part of you that is unique and to lift that up and give light to all around you. Hey, it's dark outside. Have you noticed? We need all the light we can get. **Amen.**