

Years ago, when I was pastoring at Irvington Friends Meeting, I was invited to speak at a Quaker meeting in North Carolina. It was the summertime, so Joan and the boys went with me. If you've ever attended church in the south, you know it has a different feel to it than church in the Midwest. There are certain customs, one of which is the social elevation of the pastor. Pastors are treated with great respect, which at first I found uncomfortable, but then I started enjoying. Reverend this and Reverend that. In a Quaker meeting, of all places!

I was told that at the conclusion of meeting for worship, Joan and I would be escorted to the rear of the meetinghouse where we would be greeted by the congregation as they departed. So that's what happened. They began singing the closing hymn, a gentleman came forward, led me down from the facing bench, we stopped by Joan's pew to pick her up, then off we went down the center aisle, arm in arm, while everyone else was singing *How Great Thou Art*.

Now let me just say that it is the easiest thing in the world to give a speech to a group of people you've never met and have them believing, by the end of the speech, that you're a much better person than you are really are. In fact, politicians and visiting pastors count on this.

So Joan and I stood at the door of the meetinghouse, the singing stopped, people began filing out, each one stopping to tell me it was the best sermon they'd ever heard, then telling Joan how fortunate she was to be married to me. She took it well at first, she would chuckle, and agree with them that I was perfect. But then I noticed, around the hundredth or so person, with another hundred people to go, that Joan had stopped chuckling, and finally when a lady said, "Your husband is a saint," I heard her say, "Well, if you think so, you can have him." Joan has never been one to go along with the crowd.

Lately we've been thinking about some of the traditions of the church—baptism, communion, and holy days, and re-interpreting them through the lens of Quakerism. Today, I invite us to think about saints, those people recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or likeness to God. Today, we use the word rather casually. If someone does something nice for us, we say they're a saint. But in the Catholic tradition I grew up, the word *saint* was used much more carefully, bestowed only after someone had been *canonized*, or underwent an ecclesial process culminating in their official recognition as a saint. The first native-born saint in America was Elizabeth Seton, which I didn't learn about from the church, my attendance was rather sketchy in 1975, but from watching Father Guido Sarducci on *Saturday Night Live*, when he explained the process of canonization after Elizabeth Seton was made a saint.

“To be made a saint in-a the Catholic Church, you have to have-a four miracles. But the Pope-he just waved the fourth one. And do you know why? It's-a because she was American. This woman comes along with-a three lousy miracles. I understand that-a two of them was-a card tricks.”

So that's how I learned about canonization. Now we Quakers have never had official saints, nor any process of canonization. Perhaps the closest thing we have is when we say someone is a *weighty Friend*. These are the people who are considered to have a deep spiritual life, whose insight is highly valued, so their words carry “weight.” They may or may not have a formal position in the meeting. They may or may not be theologically trained. They are those who persons of whom the rest of us might say, “Let us see what she thinks about this matter.”

Saints and weighty Friends have something in common. They are both an answer to the question, “Who are the people God seems to be speaking through?” That's a very important question, and one we ought to think about. Just this past week, Franklin Graham and William Barber went to North Carolina to speak at the statehouse. They both believed God was speaking through them, but their messages were diametrically opposed. Graham said progressive Christians were atheists, Barber spoke about caring for the poor and powerless. I must tell you Graham's crowd was far larger than Barber's, which is why we don't vote on saints.

So if we don't vote on saints, how can we identify the people God is speaking through? Perhaps the answer is something I read in Elizabeth Gilbert's book, *Eat, Pray and Love*. She wrote, "Saint Anthony said, in his solitude, he sometimes encountered devils who looked like angels, and other times he found angels who looked like devils. When asked how he could tell the difference, the saint said that you can only tell which is which is by the way you feel after the creature has left your company."

That strikes me as a wonderful test of sainthood. How do we feel after they have left?

Are we more inclined to love others, or more inclined to despise them?

Saints help us love.

Are we filled with hope, or are we filled with despair?

Saints give us hope.

Do we feel courageous and joyful, or are we fearful and angry?

Saints empower us and make us glad.

Are we moved toward generosity, or have we become selfish and self-absorbed?

Saints inspire us to give.

I was taught in my Catholic tradition that saints must be dead a certain number of years before we know they were saints. But now I think we know who the saints are as soon as they leave us. They are the souls who fill us with light, who strengthen us, who leave us better than they found us. Those are the saints, and they are all around us.