

“Your path to sainthood”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
October 31, 2021

Ephesians 2:19-22 and 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

It was Independence Day, July 4, 1963. Two men approached the Gwynn Oak Amusement Park in Baltimore, Maryland. One was a Presbyterian minister and the stated clerk of our denomination, Eugene Carson Blake. The other was a Presbyterian elder, Furman Templeton. It might have been any ordinary summer day, except for the fact that Blake was white and Templeton black, and the amusement park was for whites only. Blake and Templeton had come on a caravan of buses, as part of their ongoing effort to desegregate the park. City and county police, along with armed security guards, were there to meet them.

As the two men approached the park gate, Blake and Templeton joked that they didn't know what they'd do if they got in. They were both wearing suits. Templeton didn't like roller coasters; they made him sick. Blake couldn't do the Ferris wheel; he was afraid of heights.

At the gate, “Blake said he wanted to go into the park. The police said, ‘Go ahead.’ Blake said, ‘But I want to go in with my friend, Mr. Templeton, here.’ Templeton was denied admission. Blake pressed the matter, saying they wanted to ride the miniature Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. The police suggested that what they really wanted was a ride in the paddy wagon. [Blake said,] ‘You’ll have to take us.’ ”¹

Blake, Templeton, and 282 others were handcuffed, fingerprinted, and jailed that day for trespassing. Blake faced backlash among some of his own Presbyterians. One wrote to him, “I am delighted to learn that you are in jail. If we could keep you there it would be a boon to Christianity. You are a disgrace (that’s right) a disgrace to the Presbyterian Church and it makes me ashamed to identify myself as Presbyterian when we have such a scallywag as you acting as the Chief Executive Officer.”² But it worked. Not two months later a young African American girl named Sharon Langley accompanied by her father became the first Black child to ride the park’s merry-go-round and feel that joyous wind in her face.

The Rev. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake pastored and grew churches, served as the stated clerk for 15 years, and was elected the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. He was the author of modern ecumenism, calling for the reunification of the church. At the height of the Cold War and McCarthyism, he defied the Iron Curtain and led a church delegation to the Soviet Union to meet with the Russian Orthodox Church. And it was during his leadership that the first woman Presbyterian pastor was ordained, Margaret Towner.³

¹ Heinze, Robert H. "Eugene Carson Blake among 283 arrested in Baltimore." *Presbyterian Life*, August 1, 1963. p.24-27.

² Presbyterian Historical Society, <https://www.history.pcusa.org/blog/eugene-carson-blake-arrested-july-4-1963>

³ James Smylie, “Eugene Carson Blake: Stated clerk and Christian statesman.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 18, 2006.

The same year as his arrest, 1963, Blake marched arm in arm with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the March on Washington, and went on to lead the interfaith group that helped secure passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

So, what do you think? Is Blake a candidate for sainthood? As we mark this day of Reformation, and as we prepare for next week's All Saints Sunday, one of you asked me, "Who are the Presbyterian saints? Should we acknowledge saints? Should we pray to St. Christopher for safe travels? Or to St. Mary for childbirth?"

What about it? Saint Eugene Carson Blake, the saint of prophet scallywags. Has a rather nice ring to it.

The question is: Who's a saint? If we're talking about Saints with a capital "S" like Saint Patrick, Blake's missing a couple miracles.

In 993, Pope John XV proclaimed the first Saint. In the Roman Catholic Church there are now more than 10,000 named Saints, more than 27 for every day of the year. You can only be proclaimed a Saint once you are dead, determined to have led an especially virtuous and heroic life, and have performed from heaven at least two miracles. Once a Saint, people can ask you to pray for them or intercede on their behalf, help them out—because you're special.⁴

This is one definition of a saint. But there's an earlier definition, going all the way back to the early church. We heard it today in Paul's letters. He calls the members of the church "saints" and says that they are no longer strangers but are citizens of the kingdom of God. Why? What special things have they done? Nothing, says Paul, other than believe.

Under this definition, every Christian is a saint, not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done, in Christ. Sainthood is a gift. It's not about what we accomplish; it's about who we are. And who we are is God's.

When we name the saints on All Saints Day, we name the dead. They might not have been famous or great. They may have struggled all their lives. They may have done bad things. But we name them a saint nonetheless, because they are the children of God, and they are welcomed home. And there in God's arms, whatever was incomplete in this life is made perfect in the next.

This, then, is why Presbyterians and Catholics and Christians all over the world speak in one accord with The Apostles' Creed: "I believe in... the communion of saints."

That communion of saints with a lower case "s" doesn't wait even for death. It's happening right now, right here, among the living. We exist in God's presence, and thereby we are touched by God's holiness. God—or the *Holy Spirit*—is at work in us, each of us. We the living are like saints-in-training, saints-in-becoming; for all the power of sin in our lives, God is there with every breath to give us courage, wisdom, faithfulness, and love. We are, in the words of Donald McKim, like those road signs that read, "Under Construction." We are being remade into Christ.

⁴ Duane Krohnke, "A Presbyterian's Musings about Saints"

This is the definition that our ancestors, the leaders of the Reformation, wanted to return to. In an article she wrote a few years back, our very own Jill Fandrich said, “You will rarely, if ever, find a statue of a saint in a Presbyterian church, or a picture of a saint in a stained glass window. You will, however, find living and breathing saints all around you.”

According to the Reformers, we have no mediator but Christ. We don’t need special Saints to pray for us; we, the regular saints, can speak to God directly. Our words, even imperfect, are all God wants to hear.

The Reformers were adamant, though: there is still a place for these special saints, these heroes of the church, these lions of the faith. They are role models. Don’t pray to them; imitate them. Be the next St. Francis or Mother Teresa—or Eugene Carson Blake. For, the same God that moved in them moves in you.

That’s what makes them special—not that they have something you don’t, but that they help you see what you also had all along. The holy power of God.

The best saints aren’t intermediaries; they are mirrors.

After our first miscarriage, my wife Jenna and I felt so alone. Infertility and early child loss just don’t get talked about much in our culture. But when we went to Greece, and stumbled into the churches there, we found St. Mary. We looked long into the face of a woman who knew what it was like to lose a child. It was a familiar face. It was our face. And here, enshrined in the church, in paintings and windows and statues, was the truth that we were not alone. God was with Mary in her grief, working resurrection; and God was with us, doing the same. And as we knelt and lit candles, and asked God to watch over our child and help us on our journey, we didn’t pray to a saint; we held a friend, a friend who had walked this road already and knew the way to hope, a friend who told us we could walk this way too.

Ultimately, whether you are Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Presbyterian, that’s what makes a true saint: it’s a person in whom we feel the closeness, and possibility, of God.

Eugene Carson Blake didn’t do all those great things because he was special, because he had something you don’t. He did all those great things because God was in him. And the same God is in you. Your great things may not be passing civil rights legislation (though it might be, it can be). Your great things may be in the child you hug tonight, or the work you get up to do tomorrow morning, or the kind word you say to a stranger after worship, or the soup kitchen where you volunteer, or the prayer you whisper at night, or the time you make for play and joy, or, when it’s difficult, the truth you tell.

Here’s Jill again: “Saints are ordinary people like you and me, through whom God’s light shines.” And as that hymn goes,

*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 planes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too. **Amen.***