

The Rev. Steven Paulikas
April 28, 2022
All Saints', Austin
The Installation of the Rev. Genevieve Razim, XV Rector
Mark 1

To the saints of Austin: I bring you greetings from the saints of Brooklyn!

I am beyond honored to be here tonight to celebrate a new chapter in the ministry of this beloved parish. Thank you everyone for your warm welcome, thank you to Bishop Ryan, and thank you Genevieve for inviting me to celebrate with you. I have been blessed to know Genevieve for almost five years as we both served on the board of Episcopal Relief & Development. If you don't yet know Episcopal Relief & Development, I suggest you take a moment soon and learn about the exciting work it does around the world, from curbing gender-based violence in West Africa to helping Ukrainian refugees to rebuilding after hurricanes right here in Texas. It's people like Genevieve who lend their talent,

wisdom, and love to this holy work—and there's a place for everyone to join in, including you.

Genevieve, as the rector of one All Saints' Church to another, I feel the need to pass on a true gem of ministry to you. Use it wisely. You see, on important days like this one, I like to do a litany of the neighboring parishes that, naturally, ends with ours. St. David's is an amazing church in the heart of the city whose reputation reaches us back to New York. St Michael's is a thriving and diverse place with so many important ministries. St. Mark's is celebrating its patronal feast in the heart of God's creation in the Barton Creek Greenbelt. You Austinites have an embarrassment of riches in these and all the wonderful other Episcopal churches in your city.

...and isn't it just so precious that each of those churches has one little saint? But right here in the house tonight, we've got ALL the saints!

Thank you for laughing at my dad joke. If you hear it again from this pulpit, you'll know who to blame.

But honestly, there's something special about the name our churches share. Because it reminds us that church is where we come to practice our sainthood.

Church is where we come to practice our sainthood. And there's no place like this one to remind you you're a saint.

Tonight we observe the Feast of St. Mark as we hear the beginning of his Gospel. According to Mark, Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism. He goes down to the River Jordan and is baptized by John. And when he emerges from the water, a voice thunders from heaven: "this is my son, in whom I am well pleased."

What always shocks me about this story is its timing. You would expect the heavenly voice to ring out *after* Jesus had

performed all his miracles—healing the sick, casting out demons, proclaiming the love of God to all of God’s people. But no. Here we are at the very beginning of Jesus’ life, and God the Father is already well pleased. Jesus doesn’t have to do anything at all to make God happy with him. All he does is acknowledge who he is and whose he is. The rest is a life spent in gracious and passionate response to this simple truth. That’s what sainthood looks like.

Don’t you want that for your life? I know I do. To know that God is well pleased with you. To live a life free of fear and want because you already know how much you are loved. To spread that love in the world with your words and actions. To leave this world knowing that it’s just a little bit better than when you arrived. This is the life of a saint: our gracious and dedicated response to the love God has already shown us. And it’s the life this place is here to equip you for.

I'd like to tell you a story about a saint from my All Saints'. Her name was Vera Crane. Miss Vera joined our church when she moved to our neighborhood with her family as a teenager—in 1927. From that point on in her life, she lived within a 10 minute walk of the church, and I wouldn't be surprised if she never missed a Sunday. Miss Vera had a successful career as an executive assistant at a major bank, serving some of the most powerful men in New York finance. She was as indispensable in her work as she was unwelcome at the board table because of her gender. She retired in 1978 and immediately set about storied career of volunteerism and service. She ran a hospital gift shop—that was eventually named after her. She worked at the Seamen's Church Institute, an Episcopal ministry to sailors at the Port of New York and New Jersey. Miss Vera never married and had no biological children, but she had a huge and devoted family. The guests at her 100th birthday party came from all over the country and could barely fit in the restaurant rented for the occasion. She had a lightning quick wit, well into her second

century. Once I asked her what her favorite memories were. She gave me the kind of look elders reserve for the foolish and inexperienced. She said, “well the first fifty years were so long ago I can’t remember a thing.” Let me tell you: you always felt better leaving her apartment than when you arrived.

Miss Vera lived independently in Park Slope to the age of 103, when she moved to an Episcopal assisted living facility in New Jersey. The last days in her Brooklyn apartment were the only time I saw her sad. Living in isolation during Covid was devastating for her active and social mind. We lost her last year at the age of 107. She told her great niece she didn’t want to go yet because she loved life so much.

I’ve just told you the life of a saint, someone I knew personally. I knew the color of her eyes, what kind of cereal she liked, and what books she read. I also know that she was a member of our church for 2/3 of its entire existence and that she couldn’t imagine life without it. She came to worship God

when the church was a fixture of the community, then when people started moving away, then and when there were rumors it would close, then when the Holy Spirit sent new people our way. She, a white woman born in the administration of Woodrow Wilson, found sisters and brothers in Christ at All Saints' when it transitioned from an exclusively white church to the diverse community we now are. She came to pray, she came to receive communion, and finally, she came to be buried. She came to practice being a saint.

Dear people of All Saints'—you are the saints of God. I know that each of you knows someone like our blessed Vera. But YOU also are like her. You come here to practice your own sainthood. Some days you may not feel like a saint, and others you might rather be doing something else. I know that's what it's like for me. But make no mistake, you're here to practice your sainthood. You come to pray and sing and to be fed by the sacraments. You come to be in the company of other good

people who are striving to be saints. You come for comfort, for inspiration, and for a sense of purpose in your life.

And my goodness, after all we've been through in the pandemic, we've learned how precious a place like All Saints' is in our lives. In my part of the country, our churches are closing. The buildings are being sold or turned into condos. But the thing that gets me is that New York already has plenty of condos! What New York needs is the same thing Austin and every other place in the world needs—not more condos, but more saints!

In a time of literal as well as moral plague, who will be the healers?

In a time when it seems like our nation is balanced on the edge of a knife, who will be the peacemakers?

In a time when God's people are crying out for justice in the land, who will proclaim the Day of the Lord?

In a time when our society is becoming ever more distracted and greedy, when we are suspicious of one another rather than loving our neighbor, who will be the love of Christ to a broken world desperate for true meaning?

Only the saints will. And there is no place like church to practice your sainthood. Here, no one's trying to sell you anything, or get something out of you, or convince you to do something. We come here to be loved by God and one another. And in doing that, we discover our sainthood.

Your new rector is here to practice her sainthood alongside you. When you need encouragement on your path of sainthood, she will inspire you. When you need a prayer to lift you up, she will pray with you. When you need to hear the Word of God broken open, she will preach it with you. When

you need a hug, she'll give you one—and let me tell you—she is an amazing hugger. Anyone who knows her will tell you that Genevieve is a bright light on a cloudy horizon. She leads with warmth and grace. She is honest, transparent, and true. She loves people and cares about their lives. She has godly instincts and a deep and abiding faith. Truly to know your new rector is to love her.

Of course there are so many other things she's good at. She will dedicate all her talents to serving God in this place. But it's important for us all to remember that a rector isn't primarily a manager or an entrepreneur or a fundraiser or even a counselor or a chaplain. A rector is a spiritual leader. Even as the rector spends countless hours doing the business of the church, she is always, always pointing the rest of us to Jesus.

That is HER path to sainthood. And the good people of this church have conspired with the Holy Spirit to see that she

walks it right here, with you. But the purpose of her ministry is to strengthen you in yours. No one can tell you what your life as a saint looks like; that's something between you and God.

So as this church begins a new chapter, yours is continuing. Keep coming back to practice being saints. Over time, as this fellowship of love expands and grows, more and more people will be awakened to their own sainthood in this place. This is what the fellowship of the saints looks like. It is a beautiful thing, and there is nothing else like it.

To the saints of Austin: you are the beloved of God. God is already well pleased with you. Now go out there and show them what the saints can do. Amen.