

## “A Saint and a Gift”

1 Samuel 3.10; 1 Corinthians 11.28

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I want to do something a little out-of-the-ordinary this morning. I want to tell you about a saint, and give you a gift from that saint. I know, I know; we’re Presbyterians; we don’t do saints. Or, rather, we affirm the sainthood of *all* believers; we don’t venerate specific saints, the way they do in the Catholic and Orthodox and some Anglican churches. Except that actually ... we do, sort of. Our denomination just published a brand-new *Book of Common Worship*, copyright 2018, which I have started to acquaint myself with; and in the back of this new worship resource is a list of – well, for lack of a better word – *saints*. Specific Christians, from the first century to the present, and from a wide variety of different traditions, who have made a lasting positive impact on our common faith. I want to tell you today about a guy who’s on that list. He is, officially, a “saint” in the Catholic tradition; he has a feast day, July 31 of every year. He’s in our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* because we, too, can learn from him, and grow in Christ through a gift that he gave the whole world.

In the year 1491 – the year before “Columbus sailed the ocean blue” – during the reign of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in what we now call Spain, in an ancestral castle belonging to the Loyola family, a boy was born who was given the name Iñigo. As a boy, Iñigo enjoyed music and dancing; he loved songs both secular and sacred. When he was about 15 years old, his family sent him off to the home of the man who was King Ferdinand’s treasurer, where he would be trained for life in the royal court. As Iñigo grew to manhood he developed a great desire for worldly praise and glory. He dressed in fine clothes; he was full of daring bravado; he was eager to win the favor of the king and the nobility; he took part in military expeditions; he wore a dagger and a sword at his waist; he challenged other men to duels to the death (which he never lost); he loved women, and he liked to gamble. At the age of 24 he was arrested and prosecuted for a variety of outrageous misdemeanors. Later in his life, when he looked back on those years, he described himself as “a man given to the follies of the world, and what he enjoyed most was warlike sport, with a great and foolish desire to win fame.” He considered himself a Christian; he went to mass; yet, by his own admission, he did not live in keeping with his beliefs. He was, very much, like lots of other people, both then and now. A “Sunday Christian,” you could call him.

When Iñigo was 30 years old, he was wounded in battle. A cannonball shattered one of the bones in one leg, and created a gaping flesh wound in the other. He had surgery – without anesthetics – and was sent home to the Loyola castle to recover. The surgery was successful, but his overall condition deteriorated, and he nearly died. After about six weeks, though, he started to improve. The turning

point came during the vigil of Saints Peter and Paul, and he attributed his healing to Saint Peter. Yet it would take months before he could walk again. During those months, at the castle, mostly in bed, he passed the time by reading books. His preference was novels about knights and chivalry, but he soon exhausted the supply. Someone then gave him a book about the life of Christ, and a book about the lives of the saints. He discovered that he enjoyed reading those too. For the saints, as he saw it, were very much like the chivalrous knights he liked to read about; they served a prince (whose name was Christ), devoting their lives to his banner and standard. He found that these books were full of practical spiritual insight, and he started taking notes. His goal in life started to shift: rather than serving noble lords and fair ladies, he started to feel led to become an outstanding knight in service to Jesus Christ.

But he was still filled with fleshly desires. He would spend long hours daydreaming about a certain noble woman – going to her home, performing deeds of service for her, gaining her favor. He enjoyed those fantasies, but when they were over, he was left feeling dry and dissatisfied. He discovered that he also found enjoyment imagining himself living a life like that of the saints – and when *those* dreams were over, he felt satisfied and joyful. He eventually determined that he needed to make a complete break from his past, and begin a new life by taking a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

He spent nearly nine months mostly confined to home, regaining strength and re-learning how to walk. When he left the castle, he went first to a monastery, where he hung up his fancy clothes, replaced them with a pilgrim's tunic, spent the whole night in prayer, and left his sword at the altar. Eighteen months later, he arrived in Jerusalem. Neither his physical journey nor his spiritual journey was straightforward; he had his highs and lows, his moments of strong faith and his times of deep doubt. He spent much time in prayer, and he continued writing, taking notes on what types of prayer really *helped* him. After three weeks in Jerusalem, he made his way back to Spain, where he spent the next ten years studying theology at a university in Madrid; then to Paris, where he continued his studies, finally earning his masters degree at the age of 43. During these years, he began calling himself *Ignatius*, after a Christian theologian of the late first century. Today, we know him as "Ignatius of Loyola." Later, he would found the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. During those years in Paris, Ignatius published the first edition of his most important book, which had been slowly developing in his mind over nearly 20 years of prayer and study. It's called the *Spiritual Exercises*, and it's a how-to book on prayer. It is this book – and, indeed, one particular spiritual exercise in this book – that is a *gift* to all humankind.

Ignatius had come to believe that the most essential form of prayer was what he called an "examination of conscience." He outlines several different versions, for different occasions, but there's one in particular that he recommended for general use, by any Christian, every day. I'm going to read you what he wrote, in his book, nearly 500 years ago (translated, of course). It's what we might call the "traditional" version of this prayer. In recent years, students of Ignatius have taken this prayer and adapted or embellished it for contemporary usage. I want to share that with you as well. But let's start first with the method that Ignatius himself developed and recommended:

[from Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, §23, in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, edited by George E. Ganss, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1991)]

A METHOD FOR MAKING THE GENERAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

*It contains five points.*

*The First Point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits I have received from him.*

*The Second is to ask grace to know my sins and rid myself of them.*

*The Third is to ask an account of my soul from the hour of rising to the present examen, hour by hour or period by period; first as to thoughts, then words, then deeds...*

*The Fourth is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults.*

*The Fifth is to resolve, with his grace, to amend them.*

*Close with an Our Father. [i.e., the Lord's Prayer]*

Give thanks; ask for grace; examine your day; ask for forgiveness; resolve, with God's help, to amend your faults. It's really quite simple. And quite beautiful. He recommended its use *at least* once a day.

Now, as I indicated, there are some contemporary versions as well. This one here is published by Loyola Press, and freely available on a website called [IgnatianSpirituality.com](http://IgnatianSpirituality.com):

1. *Ask God for light.* I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not my own.
2. *Give thanks.* The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
3. *Review the day.* I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
4. *Face your shortcomings.* I face up to what is wrong – in my life and in me.
5. *Look toward the day to come.* I ask where I need God in the day to come.

That's it. That's all it is. A simple method for bringing your day to a prayerful close. The five specific steps don't exactly match the traditional version, but the overall format is pretty much the same.

I would really like to commend this to you. It is truly a precious gift. At an earlier phase of my life, I spent a couple years doing a somewhat similar exercise at the close of each day. At the time I didn't fully understand the origins and the history. But I found it *immensely* helpful ... until I fell out of the habit. I think it's time I pick up the habit again. I'm going to try using this contemporary version of the Ignatian "examen," as it's called, and I'd like to recommend it for you as well. Five simple steps. Ask God for light; give thanks; review the day; face my shortcomings; look toward the day to come. When I was doing this some years ago, I found that the best time – for me – was *right at the very end of the day*, once I was in bed and the light was out, in those precious minutes before falling asleep. You might find a different time that works for you better, but it should definitely be towards the end of the day. It's meant to be an end-of-the-day activity ... one that can not only help you feel a deeper connection with God, but one that can also help you become, more fully, the person God created you to be.

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