What comes to mind when you hear the word “saint?” What kind of person is a saint? For many of us, we might think that some of the great people from church history are the real saints: saints who are depicted in icons, or in stained-glass windows; well- known people like Paul or Luke, who have parish churches named after them. Saints are those people who have changed the world, like St. Francis or Mother Teresa.

In the Anglican tradition we have expanded the notion of what makes a saint. In the Episcopal Church, we have a book called Lesser Feasts and Fasts, which lists all the saints in our calendar. It includes all the usual ones – St. Peter, St. John – along with reformers, and Bible translators, and more recent saints like Martin Luther King, Jr. and most often these saints are recognized during Wednesday noon chapel.

My question for us is this, has such recognition of saints compromised our view of what it means to be a follower of Jesus? The message Jesus left with his disciples was that of being a servant, not a person to be held up as more important than other followers of Jesus. Perhaps, the best way to define what a saint is, is to bring greater clarity to the role of a saint. To do that, I want to quote a small dictionary I use called, “Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms written by Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary.

Rolf defines a saint as this: “In the New Testament, the word saint never refers to a special class of super-duper Christians, rather it always refers to all Christians.” According to Rolf, “Saints are not saintly because of what they do but because of what Christ has done for them. Christian saints are identified not by their own wisdom, good works, holiness, and wholeness but by the fact that they belong to Jesus.” As Groucho Marx said years ago, “I don’t want to be a member of any club that will accept me as a member,” but Jesus said in effect, ‘Only sinners need apply, and I will make you a saint.”

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the people who had traveled with Jesus no doubt look toward the disciples to figure out the “what now” question. Are we Jews, are we followers of Jesus, and if we are followers of Jesus as Jewish people, ‘What does that mean?” And how will these followers of Jesus be different than their Jewish families and friends?

Those first Christians had a lot to figure out on what it meant to be a follower of Jesus when he was no longer around to guide them. We know from certain Scriptures found in Acts and the Epistles that the early followers of Jesus met in homes where they shared meals together in the name of Jesus. The early Christian community in Jerusalem continued to participate in Jewish worship at the temple, as Jesus did, but they also met for prayer and worship in private homes where they shared their stories of Jesus. The structure of the earliest Christian services show how their faith in God and Jesus had its origins in the synagogue: they read from Scripture, they reflected on Jewish commentaries and readings, and participated in public confessions. However, the Christian community of believers changed as they met in private homes. They found their way in being followers of Jesus by professing unity that Jesus was the Son of God.

Over time the number of Christians grew, in spite, of being persecuted by the Romans, and as the private meetings in homes became more organized, our Holy Communion became an outcome of the early Christians meeting together. Through growth and a way of claiming unity, a small band of Jesus followers begin to define what it means to be a saint, or a Christian in the first century. And, if you read Church history, you know that the church hasn’t been a guiding light for goodness and servanthood through the last 20 centuries, in fact, quite the opposite. Therefore, it is important to return to the roots of Christianity, where Jesus is at the center of our worship and thinking. This story of Mary, Lazarus and Jesus explains why those early Christians retained their faith in a new way of thinking about God when they had no practical reason for doing so.

Jesus fails to come in time to heal Lazarus before he dies. He is greeted with tears, disappointment, and questions on why he somehow didn’t come immediately. The words from John say that Jesus, “was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” as he walks among the family and friends who grieve over the death of Lazarus.

Jesus doesn’t chastise the group of mourners for their lack of faith, he is moved to tears himself. Jesus grieves. Jesus, then, talks to his Father in the presence of everyone standing around, and it is then that they see a different Jesus; a Jesus who knows that his Father is a God who listens, who hears. And, then Jesus yells out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out! Unbind him and let him go.”

Why do the early Christians continue as followers of Jesus? Because Jesus loved them deeply, and they couldn’t forget how that felt. Many of those followers watched as Jesus healed other people, and they knew he was different from themselves. Somehow, God walked inside this man named Jesus, and they could do nothing but continue to explore what that meant for their lives also. Jesus left them with the hope that they, too, could be filled with the Spirit of God and be just like Jesus. As Revelation says, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God.”

We must make sense of Jesus just as those early followers of Jesus tried to do following his resurrection. They wrestled with the same question as we do, “Is Jesus is God, so that we can lead a life unbound by manmade structures that strive to stifle the Spirit of God. Talking about Jesus only gets us so far. We must explore how the life and Spirit of Jesus is stuck to our souls, our hearts, our minds. Otherwise, we merely become another institution talking about the spiritual life rather than ‘being’ spiritual.

Who are saints or followers of Jesus? Those who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior. We have strong examples of people who lived before us on what it means to follow Jesus. Those people come from all walks of life. Our family, our teachers, our mentors, our friends, and those people who allowed Jesus to unbind them. We have so many people from our past who allowed Jesus to change their lives. Dorothy Day’s call from Jesus was this: “The mystery of the poor is this: that they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him. It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love. The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.”

What has been your call from Jesus? Has he felt your tears? Have you felt his presence when your friends have let you down? I end with these words from Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury:

The Cry to God as ‘Father’ in the New Testament

is not a calm acknowledgement of a universal truth

about God’s abstract fatherhood.

It is the Child’s cry out of nightmare.

It is the cry of outrage, fear, shrinking away,

when faced with the horror of ‘the world’;

Yet, not simply or exclusively protest, but trust as well.

‘Abba Father’ all things are possible to Thee.”

Our chronological ages do not matter in the kingdom Jesus is sharing with us. He speaks to the child in all of us. Are we listening? Amen.