

What do you need to become a famous inventor? For most of us, the short list would include things like scientific aptitude, creativity, perseverance, the ability to “think outside the box” and a decent amount of self-confidence. And beyond these traits, there’s one other thing that’s absolutely essential: *money*.

Now, it’s one thing to have a good idea. It’s quite another to perfect a prototype through months of trial and error in the lab. But successful inventors do, eventually, need to make the jump from research and development to manufacturing.

That’s where the money comes in. Unless inventors are independently wealthy, they need to find at least one investor. They need the moxie to sell their dream to someone else, who believes in them and is willing to write big checks.

Take Alexander Graham Bell, for example. He was a teacher who was not above schmoozing two of his pupils’ well-heeled dads, a lawyer and a leather merchant. They were happy to fund his scheme for a new and improved telegraph. But that wasn’t Bell’s real passion. He quietly diverted some of the telegraph research funds into a far more speculative project: the telephone.

Now, as you may be aware, there’s a phrase that describes those sorts of investors: we call them *silent partners*. Forward-looking investors take on substantial risk because they believe in the inventor’s vision, industriousness, and personal integrity. They don’t, themselves, have what it takes to bring the dream to fruition. But they do have money and are willing to risk it. They take a back seat so the inventor’s genius can flourish.

Are you aware that The Bible includes some silent partners as well—spiritually speaking of course. Their support is not of the financial variety; it’s something else altogether. These partners are mentioned in our First lesson this morning: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing

before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white ...” They are what the Apostles’ Creed calls “the communion of saints.” They stand behind us, the present-day church, quietly lending us support in ways of which we’re only dimly aware.

Which begs the question, what is the communion of saints all about. The word “Saint” literally means “holy one.” Which is fitting, on a day like today, when we remember the holy ones who have gone before us in the faith, our silent partners who enjoy a new and perfected life in heaven — and who *collectively* lend their support to the church’s efforts to be faithful here on earth. (In truth, the New Testament never speaks of an individual saint. The word occurs only in the plural.)

Of course, it goes without saying that the communion of saints doesn’t scrounge up venture capital for us, but their constant prayer on our behalf is worth far more. As long as there is a communion of saints — and the promise of Revelation is that their heavenly witness is eternal — we are never lacking in spiritual capital. They are our silent partners!

The communion of saints sit at table with the Lord in the kingdom of heaven. They are the ones who taste, in Isaiah’s famous words, the storied feast on the mountain: “of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” The saints trust the power of the Lord to “destroy ... the shroud that is cast over all peoples.” They know that, in that glorious day, God will “swallow up death forever [and] ... wipe away the tears from all faces.” Our silent partners know this better than we do.

This is the same company the author of Revelation glimpses in his ecstatic vision, gathered around the throne of the Lamb, robed in white. They “worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.” And the joyous witness of the communion of saints, is that **we are**

**never alone.** Our feeble and faltering efforts to sing the Lord's song are caught up in the unending hymn of the saints.

The accumulated power of their faith washes over us like a huge wave and carries us along. In fact, whenever we break bread together in the sacrament of the Lord's supper, we share the feast of life with those who have gone before us. We find ourselves, then, truly in communion, not merely with our fellow believers kneeling beside us, but with the faithful from every age throughout all of history.

In our common life in the church, and in our individual lives, we face our obstacles and carry on the best we can, striving to live out, in word and deed, this remarkable vocation called Christian discipleship. Sometimes things go well; we sense the Holy Spirit at work in our world, and realize we're surrounded by God's love, constant as the air we breathe. We know, in bright moments like those, when everything is going well that the Christian faith of ours *works* is a practical guide for our daily living.

Of course, there are other times when we feel discouraged and disheartened. In such moments, life seems to go round and round as if we are taking one step forward, two steps back. There are times when we find ourselves nodding in sympathy with the psalmist's complaint that the wicked "have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek ... always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." (Psalm 73:4,12-13).

Yet, in every season — in good times or in bad — we can take comfort in the reassuring fact that we are never alone. For surrounding us on every side are our silent partners, the communion of saints. No struggle we confront in this life has not already been faced — and triumphed over — by some other Christian before us. There is no sorrow or loss so deep that there are none who can look upon us and share our pain. There is no moment when we are truly alone - not as

long as we remain in communion with the company of the faithful from every time and place!

So, who *are* the saints? Ordinary Christians, like us. Saints are not super-Christians with halos encircling their persons, like Superman's scarlet cape. They're not God's all-star team. Yes, one might argue that some saints are justifiably famous, but one might also point out that others have been lost to obscurity. Saints are every disciple who, in Paul's words, has "fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith."

Saints are people like Abraham, who didn't become saintly until very late in life. Scripture tells us almost nothing about the patriarch's life before age 75. What do you suppose that spiritual giant was doing during most of his adult life before he got the call to pull up stakes and move to the promised land?

We can't say for sure, but Abram was probably buying and selling livestock, providing for his family, paying his servants, and carrying out his daily duties. In all likelihood, he went for significant periods of time without any life-changing "mountaintop" experiences.

Saints are people like Teresa of Avila, who had a sense of the earthy as well as the sublime. They say Teresa was once out walking with a group of her fellow nuns, when it started pouring rain. Then, the bridge they were crossing collapsed, casting the entire company into the muddy waters. Teresa looked to the heavens and exclaimed, "God, if this is how you treat your friends, I'd hate to be your enemy!" You can almost imagine her shaking her fist at the heavens.

Saints are ordinary people, who struggle with their faith like anyone else. The communion of saints is the community of the forgiven, not the unnaturally saintly. Saints are the Christians we know and encounter day to day, the outpost of the communion of saints among the living. In fact, let me share with you a story

once told by the preacher Fred Craddock to help me illustrate the point I'm trying to make.

It seems there was a young woman who learned she had a potentially fatal cancer. She had surgery, then some treatments. She was able to get on with her life for a time; but then, at a routine checkup, she learned the dreaded disease was back.

There was more surgery and further treatment. This time it took more out of her. Recovery was slower. But she persevered and returned to her life again.

Some years later, during another routine checkup, she learned the disease had once again returned. This time, the prognosis was grim. She spent some time talking with her friends; she prayed; and she decided there would be no more surgery, no more grueling chemotherapy. The young woman went home. Her friends gathered around.

One day, Death came and knocked at the door. Her friends rushed to the door and leaned against it, to keep Death out. Death went away.

But Death came back, and this time Death not only knocked, but leaned on the door as though to push it in. The young woman's friends leaned against it all the harder. Death went away.

A short while later, Death came calling again. Death knocked on the door and leaned against the door. The friends made as if to stand against it, but the young woman said no, move aside. They looked at her as though she were crazy. She couldn't possibly know what she was saying. They refused to obey.

But she told them again, in a louder voice, to move away from the door. And when they saw the steely determination in her eyes, they knew she meant what she said, so they moved away. S

ensing no resistance, Death pushed open the door and came into the room. The young woman was sitting, propped up on pillows, waiting for Death, looking Death right in the eye.

When Death saw the strength of her spirit, Death looked beaten and ashamed. Death did take her, then — but Death knew that, by the power of Jesus Christ, and by the witness of the communion of saints gathered there in that room, there was no triumph to be had that day. Death had been beaten once again.

So, today let us celebrate the communion of saints. Let us honor and lift up our Christian brothers and Sisters who in faith have claimed the promise given to them in baptism. And let us always remember that along with our amazing God who gives us life, forgiveness, and redemption, the Saints offer us the greatest support for the Christian life we can ever have in this world as well as the next!