

SLD08.13.06 19th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
I John 4:7-12, 16b
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“Falling In Love – St. Clare of Assisi”

You know, Christian history is full of “spiritual pals,” which is what I call people committed to God who also commit to another human being for a lifetime of companionship. People who dedicate their lives to God but also choose to accompany and support some special other along their respective spiritual journeys. The history of the Christian church reveals many examples of this sort of spiritual partnership in which the love of both parties for God includes and amplifies their love for one another, and vice versa. Such holy liaisons can occur between any two people but the ones that most often make the holy headlines are those comprised of opposite genders.

Examples abound, including grouchy 4th century St. Jerome and his spiritual pal, Paula, who got canonized just for putting up with him; 6th century Scholastica and her twin brother; St. Benedict, founder of western monasticism, 16th century Teresa of Avila and her intense young compatriot, John of the Cross; 17th century St. Vincent de Paul and his magnificent accomplice, Louise de Marillac; and, of course, that first scandalous pair so featured in current literary news, Mary Magdalene and the love of her life, Jesus Christ.

Says Phyllis McGinley in her book, Saint-Watching, “Saints are simply not the saints we think they are, if we imagine them deficient in matters of ordinary human affection, of the need to love and be love, to give and receive emotional support and consolation. ...Even among saints, masculine and feminine principles...complement one another when there is work to be accomplished or simple human needs to be

reckoned with. ...I would say,” says McGinley, “that some of the greatest saints of both sexes seem to soar higher and more daringly feather to feather with the man or the woman who accompanies the flight.”¹

The spiritual partners we’re now exploring during this summer’s series on saints are St. Francis and St. Clare of Assisi. Last week we talked about St. Francis and his nutty life and crazy dreams, his foolish choices and scandalous behavior, his vow of poverty and commitment to Christ, and the simplicity and unbridled joy of his life. Well, in Clare of Assisi, goofy, godly, romantic Francis found the spiritual pal of a lifetime. And sure enough, just as McGinley suggests, neither Francis nor Clare could have become or done what they did without the companionship of one another.

Born in Assisi in 1193 to an “arrogant household of lords and knights,” Clare was a good bit younger in age and higher in station than Francis. Reportedly very beautiful, she had many suitors but, to the endless annoyance of her parents, was apparently very choosy. The story goes that one day, in an effort to cheer her up, Clare’s aunt Bona took her to the town square to hear preach that “odd little poor man,” Francis. It was an outing intended to entertain, sort of the equivalent in those days of going to a matinee or a day’s shopping spree in town.²

But the mad mendicant’s impact on Clare wasn’t exactly what her family had had in mind. Instead of being entertained, Clare became inflamed. One biographer describes Clare’s experience this way:

When Clare heard Francis preach, “the words were simple and unadorned but they touched her like a deep and purifying shaft of light. Her whole being seemed bathed in a light that came from somewhere inside her own heart. What it was that Francis had opened up she did not know. It was not merely a

¹ McGinley, Phyllis, Saint-Watching, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, N.Y., 1969, p. 80.

² Ibid., p. 82

fascination with Francis himself that drew her, but his words and something inside the words – the treasure – a secret, powerful force that came, she was sure, from God.

Clare's soul thirsted for more, and she longed to hear Francis whenever he preached to the people. But she was still in her teens and did not have the freedom to come and go as she pleased. She would, however, find a way. She would find a way because what was happening inside her came from God. She saw in Francis someone who must be experiencing what she felt in her own heart.³

Sound a bit operatic? We Presbyterians are generally not much given to the psychodrama of conversion. But remember, this was an era of consummate romanticism in Italy. And that God comes to humanity in an infinite variety of ways. In any case, Clare's conversion experience hardly holds a thespian candle to what happens next.

Feeling called of God to learn more about and from this holy man, Clare embarks on a series of clandestine meetings with Francis, unbeknownst to her parents though always chaperoned by co-conspirator Aunt Bona. Eventually arrives that infamous moment of "the celebrated Elopement." Late at night on Palm Sunday Clare lets herself out of her house by the little "door of death" – the side door which in many homes was opened only to carry out the dead (mega-meaning here – like any catechumen, Clare is about to die to her old life)– and heads for Francis' friary. To add to the symbolic (Italianate) flourish, Clare has dressed herself as a bride complete with veil and jewels.

Francis meets Clare at the chapel, removes her bridal clothes, and, taking her hair in his hands, cuts off her long, golden curls, which fall to the dirt floor of the chapel. Then, dressing Clare in the same sort of rough, undyed cloak as he wears (you

³ Bodo, Murray, Clare, A Light in the Garden, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1992, p.6.

remember – with the cross chalked on front and back) and receiving her vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, Francis declares Clare forever wed to Jesus Christ.⁴

Thus Clare becomes, with the consent of Francis and the Bishop of Assisi (though most decidedly *not* of her parents) the spiritual daughter of Francis, and the first woman to follow the dream God gave Francis of poverty and littleness for the rebuilding of God's kingdom.

For obvious reasons, Clare is unable to stay on with Francis and his friars so she is taken to a nearby Benedictine convent, and later, to the Church of San Damiano (remember the church Francis personally rebuilt rock by fallen rock?). Committed to a life of enclosure and prayer, and apart from the occasional visit to Francis and his brothers, Clare never leaves San Damiano again. Yet from there she founds her own order of sisters called the Poor Ladies, and later, the Poor Clares, which, within her lifetime (and she lived 27 years after Francis' death) expanded to multiple communities in Italy, Spain, France, England and Germany.

Though Clare is considered to have been as great a force as St. Francis in the rapid spread of the Franciscan movement, her story "is invariably linked with Francis, whom she called her Father, Planter, and Helper in the Service of Christ. It was Francis who gave Clare a vision and enabled her to define a way of life apart from the options offered by her society. But Clare's goal in life was not to be a reflection of Francis, but rather, to be, like him, a reflection of Christ."⁵

I've shared before Richard Rohr's remark that we humans are essentially imitative creatures, often unable to imagine (a way of being) until we see it "in the real."

⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

⁵ Ellsberg, Robert, All Saints, Daily Reflections On Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1999, p.345.

Witnessing how others go about the Christian life is essential to any life of faith; even saints need models to imitate and companions to point the way all the path of discipleship. “Christ is the way,” said Clare, “and Francis showed it to me.”

And the way to The Way for Clare was love, which, in itself, becomes Clare’s vocation; “a love that eventually embraces everyone and excludes no one.” When Clare first hears Francis, she falls in love. But with whom? Or with what? With Francis? With God? With Love itself? Young, idealistic, infatuated, Clare can’t quite sort it out. But over time, loving Francis, loving God, loving others all become of a piece to Clare, presenting the same urgency, the same necessity, the same challenges, the same rewards.⁶

For Clare the love of Francis becomes the love of God, and the love of God becomes the love of others. For “what *is* the love of God,” asks Murray Bodo in his book Clare, The Light in the Garden, “if not love of the Body of Christ? God became human, and in this Body God can be found and loved. The human body is God’s instrument of loving. God is spirit, yes, but also embodied in creation, ‘inspired’ in human flesh, in you and me and all humanity, and we are called to treat people accordingly.”⁷

This is how Clare came to feel about it, anyway. The “inspired” nature of flesh and the “enfleshed” nature of love meant that everything that happened in Assisi became of interest to her. She became intimately involved in the lives of all its citizens, their troubles and their illnesses, their celebrations and tragedies.”⁸ Clare’s love

⁶ Ibid. p. 59.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

reached out to the whole world, taking in all the world's pain and suffering and confusion into her prayer and her loving.

Yet, lest we imagine that the operatic romance initially sparking Clare's heart ruled the remainder of her life of discipleship, know that the order of the Poor Clares was by far and away the most austere of her day. Clare's nuns wore no stockings or shoes, slept on the ground, abstained from meat, and spoke only when obliged to by necessity or charity. They owned no possessions or property and lived entirely on daily contributions.⁹

Furthermore, the most difficult lesson about loving Clare faced and eventually integrated into herself and her order had not a shred of romance associated with - the importance in loving of letting go. Letting go of what she loved was a harsh lesson for Clare: letting go of her parents, letting go of her dream of being a wandering mendicant alongside Francis, even letting go of the felt presence of God as necessary for her life of faith.

As a cloistered nun, Clare lived in a state of constant separation from the object of her human love – Francis – and all the more so when he and his brothers moved away from Assisi. As for the object of her divine love – God – Clare experienced far more often God's absence than God's presence. In truth, Clare was lonely a lot.

But true love, Clare learned the hard way, doesn't grasp, doesn't stifle, doesn't cling. True love demands both intimacy *and* space, both communion *and* separation, both understanding *and* mystery. And from her experience of the constant loneliness of space, separation and mystery, Clare concluded that she needed to make it her business to learn how to keep on living and loving and acting out her call as

⁹ A Guide to the Saints, Kristen E. White, Ivy books, New York, 1991, pp. 82-83.

independently as possible of all the objects of her love: family, Francis, even God's felt presence.

But the absence of God's felt presence, now, letting go of that was the toughest for Clare. For the occasional moment of sweet spiritual communion with God only left her longing for more. Yet "the price one pays for ecstatic union is the loneliness and heartache of continued separation."¹⁰

But only newbies to Christianity, seekers in the springtime of their faith, stay high on the Holy Spirit all the time. Mature faith requires a different perseverance, a different fuel, a different rule to any sort of attachment to ecstatic union. The challenge for Clare, as to any of us on the path of long-term commitment to God, was to let go of all expectations of God, even of her need for God's felt presence, in order to achieve a constancy of faith regardless of outer or inner conditions.

Clare's cure for her loneliness was first to center her thoughts and heart on God, and then to reach out to others in self-forgetfulness. (For if God's "absence" seemed the source of Clare's loneliness, yet God also was its only balm.) And so Clare centered her heart on God. And not just God up there in the heavens, or even God in the depths of her own heart, but the God who dwells in others, especially those in need. Lonely self-pity drove Clare inward and away from others, while her longing for God drew her out of herself.

In the end, Clare's love for Francis, for God, for others all taught the same lesson, instructing, shaping and disciplining her new heart. Through prayer and a difficult life, Clare learned that the heart is made pure by giving away, by sharing, by releasing, by letting go. "And once Clare *had* let go, everything seemed closer to her

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid. p.20.

than ever. It is like that with the Lord. You struggle and wrestle with God for something and when you finally give in and let go, God gives you freely what you'd tried to wrest."11

The longing, loving, and letting go of which Clare's life so poignantly speaks capture well the rhythm of the challenge of the Christian life, the beat and pause of a seeker's heart, the heaving, receding tides of a life of lively faith, speaking volumes about life and loss and ultimate trust in Jesus Christ. Desire and disappointment, hope and heartache, moments of trust, eons of loneliness, consequences all of falling in love with God.

But all this talk of falling in love – off base for us Presbyterians who pride ourselves in keeping our feet on the ground and our heads most definitively out of any clouds of Catholic mysticism? Maybe. But maybe not.

Insists Jesuit priest Pedro Arrupe:

"Nothing is more practical than falling in love with God in a quite absolute and final way. For what you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

"Fall in love with God," says Arrupe. "Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."12

To the glory of God. Amen.

(See the next page for an addendum, an email from Jill in response to a reaction to the sermon that it was a sad waste that Clare, a woman, was, unlike Francis, confined to the cloister):

¹¹ Ibid. p. 64.

¹² From a plaque in Joseph's house at Green Bough House of Prayer outside Scott, Ga.

Everything you say about the socio-religio-political nature of Clare's time is true, but, oh, I hope you see something else in her story. I wouldn't wish her social conditions on anyone but truly, her life was not remotely a waste. Her insights about love, her commitment to Jesus Christ, and her resourcefulness and initiative not only spread the Franciscan movement but provided her same 'alternative lifestyle' option to many, many women across Europe. I think one of the banes of our culture is that we imagine 'success' or 'productivity' only when people are 'out there.' This diminishes the intense contribution of silence, solitude and a life a prayer (which, remember, is 'warfare to the last breath.') Clare was existentially lonely a lot because that's the nature, almost the 'tease' of ecstatic union with God. But she knew for what she was lonely, and it wasn't what most people imagine they're lonely for today. The impact and remembrance of her life throughout the centuries is testimony, I believe, to the power and effectiveness of her witness.