

Today we delve deeper into our summer “Saint” series by exploring the life of a living saint, Agnes _____. Agnes, a petite, silver haired, European-American woman, actively and passionately serves God in her church and community. Agnes is a daughter, mother, widow, and grandmother. She is a deacon, teacher, friend, nurse, mentor, leader, missionary, and handbell player. She is a disciple, servant, volunteer, director, moderator, and she is a child of God. Agnes very nicely falls into Jill’s definition of saint, “an ordinary person who becomes an extraordinary witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Today we look at Agnes’ story to gain a glimpse of how God is working and speaking through her and in doing so we hope to find some spark of truth and/or insight that might guide us in our journey.

Through listening, watching, and sharing in parts of Agnes’ life, I have begun to realize that for her not only is life a journey, but her relationship with God is a journey as well. It is a journey that brings comfort, strength, and peace along with challenges, struggles, and frustrations. For Agnes, knowing God does not stop or reach fulfillment with baptism, communion, confirmation, or Sunday morning worship, rather each of these (along with many others) are essential elements in her journey with God. They are kind of like gas stations along your journey. That may be kind of a crude analogy, but to some extent it fits. When driving cross country you come to a point, many points actually, when you can not or will not drive any further without filling up on gas or on food, without getting out to stretch your legs and take a break, without stopping to get a road map. Likewise in your spiritual journey you come to a point in the journey where you cannot or will not go any further without filling up with God, without coming to know God more. In your journey the gas station is never your destination, but is a milestone or a road mark on your journey to something more, something greater.

Ben Campbell Johnson says, “the adventure with God is not a destination but a journey. The never-ending journey begins when you open the door and invite the Presence to come into

your consciousness in an abiding way. Beginning the journey is like a wedding that takes place at a definable time; but the journey itself is like a marriage—it takes time to know and understand each other.”

To know and understand God is our mission on this journey we call life...none of us completely and fully know God. Sure, we'd like to. That's why we are all here this morning. We come seeking to worship God in community with one another, we come yearning to be in God's presence united as the Body of Christ. We all are on our own journey to know and understand God more. Agnes' journey reveals (what for many people) is a common and quite obvious concept: a person's relationship with God is a journey, not a destination. But Agnes takes this ordinary concept and lives it out in an extraordinary way.

Agnes is a servant of God. She serves God whole-heartedly. She may not always understand or even like what God is calling her to do, but she always follows. Agnes confesses that she has taught Sunday School “forever!” Which if my math is any good, “forever” is probably somewhere between 30 and 40 years. She has taught youth, children, adults, and senior adults. Some of those years were personally highly productive and fulfilling. Other years, it seemed as if God were testing her. She wondered many times, exactly what is the point of teaching Sunday School for one child? And what about all those weeks she studied and prepared a lesson and no children showed up on Sunday morning? As you can imagine this frustrated Agnes, but she stuck with it because she believed that if a child (or anyone for that matter) came to church, someone needed to be prepared for them. If one Sunday a month was the only chance she had to share the love of Christ with them, then she'd be ready for them no matter which Sunday they decided to come this month. You see Agnes believes in the importance of sharing our journey with others. And our journey as Christians dates back as far as the Bible records. The stories beginning with Adam and Eve, Moses and Miriam, Abraham and Sarah all the way

through to the present time. Agnes feels that everyone should be given the opportunity to learn, feel, and share the love and the story of Christ. At this present time, and literally I do mean at this present time (10:45 am) Agnes is teaching Sunday School to the children in her church. The strong bonds and the relationships she builds with them amaze her. She once commented to me, “I must have done something right for the children and youth to care so much about me. Even as they grow older and move into the youth group, go college, and become young adults, they still come up and give me a hug when they see me. They send me cards at Christmas and occasionally they even call me.”

Yes, Agnes, we’d have to say you definitely are doing something right. Agnes’ love for Christ, her ability to persevere, (which may even include her hard headedness and stubbornness), and her passion for teaching are all gifts from God. Agnes serves God because she loves God and in doing so she uses the gifts God has blessed upon her.

Agnes’ life is chalked full of examples of service and compassion for others. Each Thursday she travels to a run-down community center where a group of ornery, senior ladies meet for fellowship and a weekly devotion. Agnes faithfully goes each week to take their blood pressure, give them encouragement, and join in on their gossip/Bible study hour. In doing so, Agnes has learned their stories and in a small way become a part of their lives.

Likewise, each Sunday evening Agnes works with ESOL students (English for Speakers of Other Languages). She welcomes each student to the program and talks with the ESOL students before class, during their class break, and after class. She often, to the dismay and chagrin of the teachers and leaders, will be so engaged in conversation with the students that she forgets to send them on to class. But everyone realizes that the relationship and bond that Agnes builds with students is just as important as their time in class. Over the years she has built friendships and relationships with people from all over the world. She does this by just being

herself, by showing an interest in their life. By just being present and talking to them, she communicates that they are important, that they do matter. Ultimately, she is indirectly sharing the love of God with the students as she builds a relationship with them.

Agnes' mission field extends beyond her church and local community. It also encompasses Sankor and the surrounding villages in Ghana, Africa. Agnes' church partners with a Ghanaian led and founded ministry called Coast for Christ Ministries which is located in Ghana, Africa. Sankor village serves as their home location. As a retired nurse, Agnes serves as a vital team member. The team leader has admitted on several occasions, "we will really have to rethink the mission trip, if Agnes is unable to go." You see, while Agnes goes to serve the people of Sankor and the surrounding villages, she plays a fundamental role in the healthiness of her team. In Ghana Agnes gives endlessly. She often stays up all night taking care of sick team members and then leaves early in the morning so that she will be able to visit all the neighboring villages. She often returns after the team has eaten dinner and yet just in time to leave for the evening worship. A white 65 year old woman walking five to ten miles each day in the scorching heat to the neighboring villages is not something Ghanaian children see every day. In fact, many of the young children have never been outside the immediate area of their village. They have never seen anyone like Agnes. They reach out to touch her skin. They are curious, what is this white stuff? Does it rub off? What is the funny sound that comes out of her mouth? Is that a different language? (Many in Ghana speak English-as it is the official language, but let me assure you, Southern English sounds much different than Ghanaian English.)

Each evening the team travels to a different village for worship. For Agnes the evening worship is a time of incredible awe. It's difficult to explain, but picture with me for a moment. After a long, but rewarding day of walking from village to village treating the sick, and providing and teaching health care to the locals, Agnes arrives just before dusk with her team to

a local village church. She recognizes some of the men, women, and children she has treated during the day. She stops to talk to them as they welcome her to their church. The Church, meaning the body of people who gather to worship God. The actual church building may still be a dream for the villagers. In some instances, worship is held on the beach, so that their worship is accompanied by the crashing of the waves and the roaring of the wind. In other villages, worship is held on a roof top, allowing you to see the evening activity, laughter, and chatter of the village during worship. Almost always, one can see the twinkling stars through the cracks of the patched roof (if indeed a roof exists). As worship begins, the sun has completely disappeared. A small candle or a flashlight dangling from the ceiling lights the crowded the room. Even in the darkest corners and smallest window sills, one can see interested and curious eyes peeping in to see what is going on. Soon Agnes becomes consumed in their worship. The music, sound, and language are foreign to her ears. Yet she can feel that they worship God. God's power and presence fills the worship space. Agnes, overwhelmed by God's grace and mercy, worships with them. She thanks God, for allowing her to see the way in which God works in and through their lives. She astutely observes that, "these are the people we see as having so little, yet they have a wonderful experience with God. They know how to worship—Sometimes," she admits, "we lose sight of that."

I have barely begun to describe the extent to which service and relationship building is instrumental in Agnes' journey. Her love for God and her desire to serve and follow God pour forth from every ounce of her being. What becomes evident in the examples of Sunday School, ESOL, and the partnership with Coast for Christ Ministries is that Agnes has learned to listen and hear God, to watch and see God working in and through the lives of others. In other words, for Agnes, the relationships she builds with others and the love that she pours out on them and likewise receives from them, brings her closer in her journey of knowing God.

Being a servant is a major part of Agnes' life and relationship with God. She has learned to hear, see, and experience God working in and through the lives of others. She also turns to Bible study and spiritual formation for an encounter with God. Agnes believes that to have a deeper relationship with God, she must stay in communication with God. She believes that God is always present with her in her journey, but that often times she is not present with God. For this reason, her journey actively engages Bible study and spiritual formation. She is always eager to learn and to try different approaches. Throughout the years she has participated in both individual and group Bible studies and discipleship classes. Both, she agrees, are an important part of spiritual formation. The individual alone time with God is just as important as the in-depth small group discussions. God is present and works through both. Although Agnes has probably read the Bible through more than a handful of times, and although she has multiple times over taught all of the fundamental Bible stories and lessons, she continues to turn to God's word for revelation and insight in the next step in her journey. Agnes claims that "Really all of Scripture is her favorite, but the portions of scripture that most influence her life change along with the changing situations in her life." That's why it is so important for Agnes to stay in Scripture, to continue reading and discerning the Word of God.

Several times throughout the years Agnes has completed spirituality assessments. Similar to the one we took on Wednesday evening, not too long ago. Agnes is a very humble servant. She knows that God gives everyone specific gifts, but feels that she does not have many gifts or talents. In her mind, she serves God the best she can with what she has and who she is. The spirituality assessments however reveal to Agnes many of the spiritual gifts she possesses. (In truth, all those around her are already aware of and have felt the blessings of these so called "new" gifts.) But for Agnes' humble heart, these are amazingly new gifts. She treats the recognition of each gift with such thoughtfulness and care. Even though she may doubt her

possession of the gift, she takes it seriously and looks to see how she can use it to share the love of God. Agnes finds it helpful to periodically pull out the old spirituality assessments and review them. Each time she does so, she is reminded of long forgotten gifts. Typically with Agnes, the gifts are truly never forgotten or rather I should say, unused. It is simply that she doesn't name the gift. However, there is much grace, love, and encouragement found in the naming and reception of God's gifts. The gifts with which God bestows upon each of us are meant to be used to worship God, to serve God, and to ultimately show our love for God and God's love for us.

In Agnes' journey, "prayer is also essential to Christian life because prayer is the way we establish an intimate relationship with God." She believes that in our conversing with God, we offer prayers of adoration and thanksgiving, prayers of confession, and prayers of supplication for others and for ourselves. Agnes prays trusting God to do the things we ask, but often knowing that we pray in God's will. She affirms intercessory prayer as enriching for both one's self and for others. Both community prayer time and individual prayer time function as significant means in which she is able to converse with God. Community or small group prayer time truly engages her passion to know God and to know others. It provides another way for her to share and deepen the bonds of relationship with others. Agnes excitedly acknowledges that there is no one way to pray. "One doesn't have to be sitting down with eyes closed and hands folded to be able to talk to god," she proclaims. "There are many different ways!" For Agnes prayer is a continual part of her life and spiritual formation. Prayer helps her communicate with God and draws her closer to God. She often prays while walking, washing dishes, and ironing. For Agnes, it's the quiet time with God that is important. She believes you can talk to God anytime. And that it is the communication with and the experience of God that is seen, felt, and heard through and in Bible study and spiritual formation and through her experiences and relationships with others.

This is Agnes' journey in her relationship with God. It is how Agnes seeks to know God more. What is so striking to me about Agnes' story is that it sounds much like ours. Today amongst us we have teachers, leaders, parents, children, mentors, servants, and disciples of God. We are different from Agnes in that God has given each of us our own specific gifts and talents, but we are all on a journey both in life and in our relationship with God. And for us here at Emory Church our journeys are intertwined with one another. For a small portion of our journey whether on Sunday morning, Wed. night, or just we meet one another in our homes, on the street, or in the store, our journeys intersect. Where are you on your journey to know God? Have you been sitting at the filling station for quite a long time? Are you down in the valley wrestling with God or feeling alone and in despair? Do you feel like your journey has you walking a tight-rope or are you high up on that mountain top feeling refreshed and anew? We, here at Emory Church are united as the Body of Christ. Our journeys intersect as we come to worship God. We seek to know God more and we seek to know how God is working in and through us as a community and through us as individuals. As Agnes Church would encourage us: Share your story, your journey with each another. In doing so, you will see the work of Christ.