

SLD08.22.10 2 Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Luke 13:10-17
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I Corinthians 15:10 “By the grace of God I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.”

“Caryll Houselander – Divine Eccentric”

All summer here at Emory Church we’ve been exploring the lives and lessons of a series of “saints,” in quotes, those special friends of God whose lives may reflect some lesson, some wisdom, some hint or direction for our own faith journeys. *Our* “saints,” though, are not necessarily officially canonized ones, since we in the Reformed tradition don’t really believe that one person is any holier than another. They’re just folks who have come to our attention who may have something to teach us stumbling disciples about what it means to follow Jesus in our own time, in our own way.

I’ve preached on “saints” in the summers for many years. So this year we decided to vote on our “Top Ten,” and hear from them again. Number eight on the list is Caryll Houselander, oddball English lay mystic of the ‘40’s and ‘50’s.

Never heard of her? Well, neither had I until she came to my attention down at my retreat center when someone read aloud the following passage:

“As German ‘Doodlebug’ bombs convulsed wartime London, Caryll Houselander looked through her thick eyeglasses into the bathroom mirror and saw her carrotty red pageboy framing a face that was not pretty. As she did every day, for reasons known only to her, she covered her face with a chalky-white substance that gave her the kind of ‘dead-white face’ that a friend described as ‘the tragic look one associates with clowns and great comedians.’”¹

¹ <http://findarticles.com>, *National Catholic Reporter*, December 12, 2003.

I found myself wanting to learn more about this “goth girl” of the forties whom Ellsberg includes in his book of contemporary saints.²

For one thing, Houselander is widely regarded as odd, and personally I relate to “odd.” Secondly, Houselander isn’t odd in that pious sort of way that all the “holy” ones seem a breed apart, but rather in a sort of way that makes her something of a breed apart from all the other “holy” ones. For besides her peculiar looks, Houselander was known to swear, tell off-color jokes, chain smoke, and drink gin. Neither patient nor kind nor gentle, she did not suffer fools gladly, or even tactfully, and was generally considered an altogether...difficult person. Puts me in the mind of the crotch-scratching, beer-burping angel Michael, in the movie of the same name.

But besides Houselander’s earthy integrity, what draws me to this nutty, acerbic, peculiar “saint” is her radical insistence that a) Christ is to be found in all people and, b) to be fully faithful to the body of Christ one must become ...not pious...not good...and certainly not saintly...but fully... who...you...are.

Born in 1901 in Bath, England, Caryll Houselander was the second of two daughters born to Willmott and Gertrude Houselander, an attractive and athletic couple. Willmott was a skilled huntsman; “Gert” had played center court at Wimbledon. Little Caryll, on the other hand, was a sickly child who wasn’t expected to survive a day. Although she did survive, she was never healthy and her physical weakness over time seemed to distance her parents.

When Caryll was six, her mother’s conversion to Catholicism led to her baptism, if not to her fondness for religious practices. “When I was a small child,” Houselander writes, “someone for whom I had great respect told me never to do anything that Our Lady

² Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses For Our Time, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1997.

(Mother Mary) would not do. For if I did, she said, the angels in heaven would blush. For a short time this advice 'took' in me like an inoculation causing a positive paralysis of piety, as it was clear to me that all those things which spelled joy to me were from henceforth taboo."³

At the age of nine, Houselander's parents permanently separated, her mother opened a boarding house, and Caryll was sent away to a cloistered convent, where she stayed even during holidays. At the convent, the French and Belgian nuns taught the children how to make jams, knit woolen helmets, and hate Germans.

One day, though, young Caryll noticed a German nun sitting alone, cleaning shoes and weeping. As she watched the nun, a picture formed in Caryll's mind of the nun's head weighed down by a crown of thorns, which she came to understand as Christ suffering in this nun.

Illness truncated Houselander's education at the convent and she was sent home to live and work at her mother's boarding house. Retiring and unwell, Houselander suffered a continual fear of people. "Even in my own house I could not bring myself to enter a room in which there were other people," she said. "Even people I knew well." It seems likely that Houselander suffered from panic attacks. For these and other oddities, she was soon pronounced a "neurotic." I can personally relate to 'neurotic,' too.

Anyway, so what happens to her on the way to the market one day could simply be another "neurotic episode." Because she looks and see in the sky "this gigantic and living Russian icon" – in which she recognized Christ the King crucified, "lifted above the world and filling the sky...with his head bowed down...brooding over the world."

³ www.catholicauthors.com/houselander.html

Shortly afterwards, Houselander learns of the assassination of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and sees from newspaper photos that it was Nicholas' face she'd seen on the suffering Christ.

Interesting, but still...you know...weird.

Too weird for the church, for whom she never had much use anyway. One day Houselander goes to a Sunday Mass and sits in somebody's else's pew. [Now, we're not so bad about this here at Emory Church, but back when I was a kid at Central Church, you better not sit down in one of the four *Oglesby* pews!] Well, when the "owners" of the pew (in those days, people really did pay a "pew tax") ask Caryll to move, she refuses to do it, until ushers come and drag her out of the church! Her outraged response: "I will never come back. Forget it. You will never see me here again!"⁴

Still, darn if God doesn't bug Houselander with yet a third vision, this one in a crowded subway train amid "all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging." This time Houselander clearly sees Christ in each passenger, as she describes it, (Christ) "living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them." Still she keeps her visions to herself, returning again to school, this time to art school.

She graduates in 1945, does layout in an advertising office, also starts illustrating books, and developing her favorite artistic medium, carving wood. At one point she falls in love with a famous British spy, by the name of Sidney Riley, after whom Ian Fleming modeled his renowned fictional figure, James Bond, and whom Nabb has a whole video series on. Riley, being the sort of cad that he was, runs off with another woman and breaks Caryll's heart.⁵

⁴ www.authorsden.com, "The Faces of Forgiveness," by A.J. Garrotto

⁵ Garrotto, p.3.

Meanwhile, Houselander devotes much of her spare time during World War II to occupational therapy for child refugees and shell-shocked soldiers from the Continent. Her popularity and success in healing the hurts and hearts of many became formal work when Dr. Strauss, later President of the British Psychological Society, starting intentionally referring patients to Houselander. Her gift? Strauss said simply, “She loved them back to life.”⁶

However, a priest whom she respected advised her to put aside everything she was doing and concentrate on her writing. Continuing to work mentally disabled children, yet Houselander did turn her attention to what was to become an astonishing literary career, producing 15 books, and 700 poems, short stories and articles. Remarkably one contemporary about her writing,

“Houselander seems to see everything for the first time...the driest of doctrinal considerations shines out like a restored picture when she has finished with it. And her writing is also natural; she seems to find no difficulty in getting the right word; no, not merely the right word, the telling word, that leaves you gasping.”⁷

And the most “telling word” pulsing throughout Houselander’s work was none other than the same unequivocal message she received from her visions – that *Christ is in all people, even those from whom we turn away*. Christ is in all people, even those from whom we turn, especially, Houselander would say, if we turn away from them because of some image we’ve formed about what sanctity is supposed to look like.

She warned, “If we look for Christ “only in the saints, we shall miss him. If we look for Christ in ourselves, in what we imagine to be the good in us, we shall begin in presumption and end in despair. And if we reach out for Christ in other people only in the way we think he *should* be, in the way we already understand, we will miss the way he *chooses* to be, he who is himself *The Way*.”

In everyone around her, good or bad, Houselander saw the suffering savior.

⁶ www.catholicculture.org/docs, “Seeing Christ in All People,” Karen Lynn Krugh.

⁷ Krugh, p.2, quote from Monsignor Ronald Knox.

“Reverence must be paid even to those sinners whose souls seem to be dead,” she declared, “because it is Christ, who is the life of the soul, who is dead in them. They are his tombs, and Christ in the tomb is still potentially the risen Christ.”⁸

In contrast to those who start with “the idea of preserving the good in people,” Houselander invariably began with the Calvinistic notion that “everything was in ruins.”

“I do not expect to find people good,” she writes, “but I expect to find Christ wounded in them, and that, of course, is what I do find.”

This, then, was the radically accepting and non-judgmental attitude with which Houselander regarded all humanity.

“It’s easy to see Christ indwelling in saints and ‘imaginary people,’” she said, “but far more difficult in our own relations and our intimate friends. Always,” she said, “it is easier to see a finely carved Christ hanging on a gilded cross that it is to see him in our boss, our estranged sister, our enemy in war.”⁹

With such directness and simplicity, Houselander writes not only of seeing the wounded Christ in every other human being, but also of seeing the wounded Christ in *ourselves*.

“The first exercise in simplicity,” says Houselander, “is to accept oneself as one is. There are two tremendous results of this: one is humility; the other is that it enables other people to accept us as we are, and in this there is real charity.”¹⁰

And again, “Each one has something to give all the others...and each owes it to all the others to be him- or her-self,” in order to supply what the other lacks. Indeed, to deny another’s humanity is to mutilate the Body of Christ.¹¹

Essentially, from her visions and experiences of life, Houselander derives a virtual commandment for each person to drop all pretensions of sanctity and simply be who he or she is, not only for one’s personal integrity but for the integrity of the larger Body of Christ.

⁸ www.theotodkops.org.uk “Caryl Houselander: Essential Writings,” p.1

⁹ http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_7_40/ai_111616673/, “Neurotic Mystic”

¹⁰ Krugh, p.3

¹¹ “Neurotic Mystic,” p. 3.

In the light of all the “oughts” and “shoulds” of discipleship, don’t you find Houselander’s perspective rather refreshing? We spend so much time, at least / spend so much time, pushing and pressing myself to be something more than I am... a better mom, a better pastor, a better friend, sister, worker, citizen, disciple...all the while holding up a seemingly infinite litany of expectations of what a better mom, pastor, friend, sister, worker, citizen and disciple ought to look like. Which can wear a body out, you know?

What I hear Houselander saying is, “Okay, so drop all that and just be you. Not only is it a whole lot less work, it’s all God calls you to be. It’s how Christ lives in you. It’s how the Body of Christ gets put together, by each of us simply being, or perhaps more accurately, supporting one another in becoming, more fully and genuinely, who we are.”

This puts me in the mind of a poem I came across once in a Holy Ground newsletter. “Holy Ground” was an intentional Christian community up in Asheville.

The poem goes like this:

I asked God if it were okay
to be melodramatic
and She said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
And She said sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
And She said honey
She calls me that sometimes
She said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it okay if I don’t paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
Who knows where She picked that up
What I’m telling you is
Yes Yes Yes!¹²

¹² Kaylin Haught, Holy Ground newsletter, Asheville, N.C., Dec. 2002.

This is the kind of God Houselander insists upon, One who, to the core of who each of us really is, to the yearnings God places in us, to our deepest truths and instincts and impulses and desires, says “Yes Yes Yes!”

At the same time, Houselander writes, “to accept oneself as one is; to accept life as it is; it is one thing to say this and another to do it. What is involved? First of all, it involves the abandoning of all unreality in ourselves. But even granted we have the courage to face ourselves and root out every trace of pretense, how shall we then tolerate the emptiness, the insignificance, that we build our elaborate pretense to cover?”

“The answer is simple,” she says. “If we are afraid to know ourselves for what we are, it is because we have not the least idea...of the miracle of life-giving love that we are. There is no pretense that can approach the wonder of the truth about us, no unreality that comes anywhere near the reality.”

Insists Houselander, “For we are ‘other Christs. Our destiny is to live the Christ-life; to bring Christ’s life into the world; to increase Christ’s love in the world; to give Christ’s peace to the world.”¹³

No question but that through her personal sufferings, her healing compassion, and her identification with the suffering Christ, Houselander herself became another Christ, even if she did remain a difficult person, complicated, neurotic, a puzzling paradox. While she preached a social gospel, she lived a virtual recluse. While her heart opened to the suffering of the world, she continued to wield a razor-sharp tongue and biting sense of humor. Saw Christ in all persons but still tended to push herself way too hard.

If Houselander’s style seems at odds with most of our preconceptions of what constitutes sanctity, still, as one writer notes, “there are too few saints with whom...people

¹³ Krugh, p.5.

can identify. ...The lives of most saints might inspire admiration but rarely a shock of recognition. Awe, perhaps, but rarely giggles.

Truth is, when you think about it, Jesus' closest companions have always been a bit of a mixed bag. So besides Houselander's determination to see and suffer with Christ in all people, perhaps her greatest gift to us is the manner in which she allowed Christ to transform her flawed and goofy nature into a divine work of art."¹⁴ May each of us flawed, bent over, goofy, and afflicted disciples also dare to stand straight at the touch of Jesus' "Yes!," and be made ...not pious...not good...and certainly not saintly...but fully... who...we...are.

To the glory of God. Amen.

¹⁴ <http://www.peregrina.com/caryll/caryll.html>