

**SLD08.24.08 21<sup>st</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Ephesians 1:15-19**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“This Summer’s Saints”**

It’s time for us to bring our summer saint series to a close. For some of us that’s a relief – enough of odd personalities and weird music and peculiar worship conventions! Others will miss the stories and history lessons and testimonies of our broad spectrum of witnesses. Still others, mostly gone during the summer, will think, huh? What’d we miss? Well, I’m fixing to tell you, for today is our annual summary of our summer saints.

It has gotten to be kind of a annual ritual for us, this summer saints series. For me I guess this would be my sixth or seventh year. For us together, well, I guess around our third or fourth year. On the hope that y’all will approve my continuing with you another year (consider this announcement #1 for our congregational meeting of September 14<sup>th</sup> for the purpose of electing elders and extending my call, should it be the will of the body) on that hope, the staff has already started planning NEXT year’s summer saint series. Instead of individuals, we’ll be focusing next year on sacred *communities*, on groups of folks who have covenanted together in some special way to follow the gospel – kind of like us, but on steroids. It’ll be different, but what else is new?

But this year, this year we explored the lives of a lively bunch of individual extraordinary ones to see what they had to teach, or reach, to us that might apply to our own lives, opening our series with that fireball of a gospel witness, 19<sup>th</sup> century African American, Sojourner Truth.

Born into slavery in the state of New York in 1797, Sojourner spent the first half of her life in bondage, until, in 1826, she escaped before dawn with her infant daughter. “I didn’t run off,” allowed Sojourner, “for I thought that wicked. But I walked off, believing that to be all right.”

In the years that followed, God touched Sojourner’s life not only with a personal experience of the Divine Presence but with a personal urgency to do whatever she could on behalf of the most oppressed people of this country. As preacher, speaker, writer and political activist during and after the Civil War, Sojourner organized rallies, galvanized communities, and met with presidents to spread her word against slavery, capital punishment, and the inequality of women’s rights. An icon of endurance, strength, vision and courage, Sojourner Truth’s life became a time-honored testimony of what one person on fire with gospel, despite all odds, can do.

Then, inviting Trinity Church in Decatur to worship with us in our sanctuary, we celebrated and learned from the life of African American writer, preacher, teacher and composer, James Weldon Johnson, a pioneer of the civil rights movement long before its ‘established’ decade. Wrote Johnson with deep conviction, “We must fashion something that rises above race reaching out in universal truth and beauty.” And certainly he spent his life attempting to do just that. The question, then, that Jonathan Scanlon, who preached this sermon, asked us to consider is why the eleven o’clock Sunday worship hour remains the most segregated time of the week in our society?

Our next witness came through the candid, courageous, optimistic young voice of the 13-year-old German Jew, Anne Frank, a child who did *not* survive the holocaust. Together we looked at the conditions in Germany in the 30’s and 40’s that led to Hitler

and the Nazi movement, as well as at the horrifying and death-dealing practices of the Third Reich's racist imperialism. We listened, too, to perhaps the best-known line of Anne's diary - "I still believe," she said, "in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart." But that was before the Frank family was discovered in their hiding.

So while appreciating Anne's optimism and courage, we pressed on to what happened to Anne and her family *after* she'd written that line - the terror of arrest, separation from family, disinfection, forced labor, her daily witness of children being taken to the gas chambers, and finally the sickness, death, and burial in a mass grave that became Anne's final destiny. Thus we viewed the testimony of Anne's life less as one who heroically transcended misery than as one about to be destroyed by it. In the end, Anne's gift to us was less her determined optimism than the opportunity she gave us to know her, to relate to her, to care for her in a way the staggering numbers of holocaust victims disallow. If we cannot grasp the breadth of the horror of the holocaust, yet, because of the witness of the life of Anne Frank, the breadth of the horror of it does not loosen its grasp on us. Anne helps us remember, and, as Jewish mystic Baal Shem Tov advises, in remembrance lies the secret of redemption.

After Anne Frank, our summer seminary intern, Diane Hunter, preached her first sermon on Mary Magdalene, reviewing for us the many romantic and misguided notions about Mary across the millennia, as well as noting Mary's courage and clarity in recognizing and responding to Jesus' call. Diane asked us whether we ourselves are listening for Jesus' call. And listening, do we hear? And hearing, are we daring, as Mary did, to respond with courage and obedience and determined action?

On the Fourth of July weekend, we turned our attention to an 18<sup>th</sup> century legendary “saint” of our own country, Johnny Appleseed. Born John Chapman in 1774 in Boston, Mass., Appleseed felt drawn, like so many adventuresome people of his day, to travel westward. Combining that urge with good business sense, native industry, a keen eye for opportunity, and a couple of sacks of apple seeds obtained for free from a local cider mill, Appleseed managed to plant and establish nurseries all over Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana.

But it wasn't just his plantings that made Appleseed so memorable. It was that plus his simple and austere lifestyle, combined with the impulses of his deep faith continually to help others in need, that what made him the stuff of legend. And we learned that the root of Johnny Appleseed's good deeds and missionary tendencies was the Christian teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg. Independent, eccentric, and industrious, Chapman spent the whole of his adult life wandering around Ohio and Indiana, barefoot, clad in rags, a tin can on his head and a sack of apple seeds on his shoulder, reading scripture, cultivating nurseries and doing good where, when and how he could. Jesus said, “as for what is sown on good soil, that's the one who hears the word and understands it, and who indeed bears fruit.” The testimony of Appleseed left us asking just how fertile is the soil of our own hearts?

Our next Christian witness was Helen Keller – and not just for her extraordinary courage and success in transcending the limitations of her physical limitation – being blind, deaf and mute. Diane introduced us to Keller as a passionate social activist, as well, one continually advocating for the poor and marginalized in courageous and creative ways. Amazing us with what Keller accomplished despite her handicaps,

Diane pressed us to imagine what we could do if we shrugged off our own blindness and deafness to follow Jesus.

After Helen Keller, we turned toward the east, to the subcontinent of India, for our next two “saints.” First, renowned Mahatma Gandhi taught us the principles of discipline, non-violence, and passionate concern for the greater good, as well as the importance of faith translated into action.

Gandhi was followed by the Indian Christian mystic, Sadhu Sundar Singh, who embodied for us the power of simple faith, reminding us that “the heart, not the head, is the temple of God.” At 16 years of age, Sundar became a sadhu, an Indian beggar-monk, and began what would become a twenty-five year pilgrimage throughout the world to spread the good news of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pulling no punches about the dryness of the West’s spirituality, Sundar named materialism and intellectualism as the chief causes of our hardness of heart, suggesting that “many people in the West do not understand what Christianity really is.” And something about what he was saying must have been true. For despite the virtual absence in his teachings of rational orientation or categorization or theological analysis, the public appetite for his message grew, as did the desire to experience Jesus Christ in a new and passionate way.

The first Sunday of August, we celebrated our third annual Blessing of the Animals by hearing about the witness of Fred Myers, founder of the Humane Society in the United States. Moved by deep convictions against cruelty to animals, Myers founded the Humane Society in 1954 to address such issues as humane slaughter, dog and cock fighting, and the proper care of animals in shelters. “All thoughtful people

recognize that cruelty is an evil that should be eradicated from our society,” declared Myers, “not merely for the sake of animals, but for our own good. For cruelty, whether to animals or humans, causes in the person a moral and cultural erosion that is harmful to the whole society.”

Through Myers’ example, Diane reminded us of the charge and responsibility we all have given God’s gift to humanity of “dominion” over God’s creatures.

Next, Deedra offered us a glimpse into the life of 17<sup>th</sup> century religious libertarian, Roger Williams, a free-thinking English theologian, a proponent of religious toleration, separation of the church and state, the civil rights of women, and fair dealings with Native Americans. Like other Puritans of early American history, Williams claimed and exercised freedom of religious conscience. Unlike many, however, he also extended that freedom to all others, avowing that “no person within (his colony of Providence) at any time hereafter shall be in any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question for any difference in opinion in matters of religion...” and “that all and any person may, from time to time, and at all times hereafter freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences in matters of religious concernment.”

Such egalitarian ideas were radical for his time and resulted in severe criticism, punishment, and even exile. Through Williams’ witness, Deedra prompted us to consider how, in our own multi-national, multi-faith communities, we exercise tolerance and protect the freedom and conscience of those who think and worship differently than we do.

And finally, of course, only last week, we ventured into the world of 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic and poet, Jalal ad-Din Rumi. It was a bit of a stretch for us mainline Presbyterians to hang out even briefly with such longing, such passion, for God.

But we did it, didn't we? And some of us may even have recognized ourselves. Others of us grinned with delight at the beauty and longing of the God-smitten, whether we personally could relate or not. Still others just rolled their eyes, looking forward to when worship would get back to "normal."

And that's how it is with all the "saints," don't you see? At least the way WE here at Emory Church go at them. We don't worship them. We don't come to them with intercessory prayer. Other times, given the hoi polloi arriving on the scene, we may not even particularly like them. But once in a while maybe we recognize in their stories something of ourselves. Maybe not how we are but how we could be if we took a chance, if we followed God's call, if we threw caution to the wind and risked surrendering all we have, and are, and hope for, to the gospel.

And that's the point, don't you see? Just to broaden the imagination. To help us think, and feel, and speculate, and maybe even act, outside the box of how we imagine ourselves to be.

I'm not saying we should, or even could, become unreasonably smitten with God; unseasonably inspired to turn our lives topsy turvy with the gospel. But when somebody does, well, it makes an impression, doesn't it?

Allow me to share with you some wisdom from Frederick Buechner. He says, "we are all of us more mystics than we believe or choose to believe – life is complicated enough as it is, after all. We have seen more than we let on, even to ourselves.

Through some moment of beauty of pain, some sudden turning of our lives, we catch glimmers at least of what the saints are blinded by; only then, unlike the saints, we tend to go on as though nothing has happened. To go on as though something *has* happened, even though we are not sure what it was or just where we are supposed to go with it, is to enter the dimension of life that religion is a word for.”<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is why we contrive this series on saints every summer – to offer you and me yet another invitation to enter with verve and passion and imagination the dimension of life that religion is a word for, that we might go on as though something, through the gospel of Jesus Christ, has, indeed, happened.

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, [Listening to Your Life](#), HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp.168-169.