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Emory Presbyterian Church
Ephesians 1:15-19
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“This Summer’s Saints”

Back in early June, we commenced our annual summer series of sermons about saints here at Emory Church. We of the Reformed tradition don’t really regard any one human being as ultimately more “saintly” than another, at least before God. But we *do* welcome the opportunity to hear how other God-smitten ones go about living into authentic discipleship of Jesus Christ. So this summer we turned toward a healthy handful of Spiritual Great Ones in order to witness their lives, their choices, their risks and their rewards, listening always for the lesson or insight or action that might inform our own spiritual journey.

David Petersen, Professor of Old Testament at Candler, started us off with a sermon about two saints, the powerful prophet Elijah, and the pitiful, poor, anonymous widow with whom he transacts. In his telling of their story, David emphasized for us the chasm of difference between the two – just how “other” they are to one another: one has a name, the other is anonymous; one is an Israelite, the other, a Phoenician; one a male with power, the other, a female with no social standing. Yet God commands the two to feed each other. The widow goes first, out of her meager supply of meal and oil. Then Elijah feeds the widow and her boy, out the riches of his miraculous power. David reminded us how Christ gathers *us* around his table and feeds us regardless of who we are, certainly regardless of our worthiness. So are we called to risk feeding others, not just those whose ways are our ways, but those we regard as “Other.”

Then Deedra Rich shifted us at warp speed from the Iron Age to the witness of a woman living today named Agnes -----, whose simple, clear and steadfast commitment to both her personal faith journey and her community of faith taught us the power of attending to the spiritual gifts God gives us, as well as of the importance of cultivating and offering those gifts back to God's in service. Through Agnes' story, Deedra challenged us to consider where we are on our journey to know God, as well as how our journeys intersect in community here at Emory Church.

Next in our saintly line-up came renowned 14th century English mystic and anchoress, Julian of Norwich. An extraordinary woman of both vision and visions, Julian lived for 40 years in a 10 x 10' room attached to the side of an English cathedral. Through an inside window, she observed worship services, and through an exterior, she communicated with the outside world. Julian's calm, thoughtful presence as counselor, guide and spiritual friend offered a dramatic alternative to the social, political and economic chaos of medieval England, and people traveled from all over to seek her counsel. In our day, Julian is best known for her *Book of Showings*, a remarkable treatise that reveals her not only her imaginative theology but her profound trust in God, whom she describes as our Father, our Mother and our true spouse. The "meta-story" Julian offers to people of every age, symbolized in her writings as in our worship service last June by a hazelnut, is her unshakeable belief in God's love and goodwill despite the many uncontrollable aspects of life. "All will be well," comforts Julian. "God may make all things well, God can make all things well, and God shall make all things well."

From 14th century England we moved to 20th century India, where Dom Bede Griffiths established his Christian ashram. From his thatched hut in Shantivanam,

Griffiths, who became known as Swami Dayananda, challenged us in the church today to transcend the limits of our institutional structures and culture-restricted imaginations to open ourselves to the presence of the Spirit all over the world. A living bridge between different cultures and religious paths, Griffiths pioneered the cross-fertilization of Eastern and Western religions, assisting in the rebirth of the vitality of Christian wisdom and mystery. The testimony of Griffiths' life pressed the question: just how big are we willing to allow our God to be?

Then, as if to extend the question to just how diverse we are willing to allow our fellow Christians to be, next came nutty divine eccentric, Caryll Houselander, oddball English lay mystic of the 40's and 50's. With her carrot red hair and chalky-white make-up, chain-smoking, gin-drinking, foul-mouthed Houselander was yet subject to visions of God's compassion and grace. And the message they gave her was simply this: that Christ is in all people, even those from whom we turn away.

And if Houselander saw the suffering savior in everyone around her, yet she also perceived the potential of the *risen* Christ in each person with whom she came in contact. So it was that through the eccentricity of her life, combined with her work with shell-shocked children and soldiers during WWII, that Houselander's testimony came to us – that to be fully faithful to the body of Christ, one must become...not pious...not good...and certainly not saintly...but fully...who...we...*really*...are.

Of the same era but of a very different path was our next visitor from the pantheon of Admired Ones, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, born Edith Stein. Raised a devout German Jew, in teenage and young adulthood years, Stein became a skeptical atheist. Yet during University, she felt drawn to the existential philosophy of

Edmund Husserl and the passionate spirituality of 15th century St. Teresa of Avila, (just in case you imagine paying attention to the saints doesn't make a difference), upon which, against all personal history and the angst it caused her family, Stein joined the Catholic church as a Carmelite nun. Scholar, philosopher and mystic, Stein ultimately became also a Christian martyr, when she was executed at Auschwitz for both her Jewish heritage and her Christian practice. Stein's witness was to the poignancy and the power of Jesus' command that we must lose our life in order to find it. For, as she wrote, "In this growing into oneself and toward God, one inevitably, and irrevocably, encounters the cross." Yet, Stein insisted, "choosing this way is the highest act of freedom available to any person because the way of the cross leads, just as inevitably, to the glory of the Resurrection."

Next we heard from Quaker teacher, preacher, and pacifist activist, Rufus Jones, whose emphasis on the indwelling light of Christ in every person invited us to consider what flame God might be trying to kindle and fan in each of us. This inner light, this inward Christ, of which Jones spoke is not only God's immediate relationship with the heart of every human being, but also God's means of moving and directing our action in the world. Consistent with his Quaker sect, Jones felt and preached a magnetic draw toward both the intimate, mystical, inner experience of God, *and* the manifestation of that experience in creative, redemptive, and often risky, activity in the world.

Guest preacher Tavye Morgan then introduced us to Central American archbishop and activist for the poor, Oscar Romero. Certainly the authorities of the church and the government of Salvador did not expect conservative, predictable and ambitious Romero to risk, and ultimately give, his life for the poor of his country.

Indeed, neither they nor Romero anticipated his personal “awakening,” as Tavye put it, when close friends were killed by government sponsored death squads. But once he had been awakened to the reality of life for the people around him, “One cannot close one’s eyes to such things,” declared Romero. Romero’s challenge to us? Wake up. Wake up and look at the lives of the disenfranchised around you. And risk caring about it. Risk responding to it.

Then, when we worshipped over at Trinity Church the first Sunday of August, Cecelya Taylor preached about Howard Thurman, 20th century African American scholar and mystic, whose world travels and spiritual insight led him to recognize both the difference between the religion of Jesus and the culture of Christianity, and the vastness of the God who dwells in every human’s heart. Through trafficking with such individuals as Rufus Jones and Mahatma Gandhi, Thurman came to recognize the eternal connectedness of all God’s children. At the same time, Thurman worked and struggled daily to align his spirit with the Great Spirit of his Creator, leaving us wondering how we might do the same.

After 20th century Thurman, Tavye whipped us back in time to meet somebody everybody in 4th century Constantinople had heard of, even if we hadn’t, one Evagrius of Pontus. Now this Evagrius was a Christian theologian and generally a good guy, but he had a hard time living a consistently godly life. Imagine that. And when Evagrius looked around, why, he noticed that others were struggling as well. And not only were others struggling, but different kinds of people seemed to be struggling with different kinds of temptations. Well, keen thinker and observer of human nature that he was, Evagrius made it his business to sketch out in a systematic fashion what he saw as the

universal obstacles to living a godly life. And the reason Evagrius' insights are especially pertinent to us here at Emory Church, besides reminding us that we're essentially a mess, is that Evagrius' work provides an early Christian basis for understanding the Enneagram, a tool used today to help disciples live more consciously into discipleship. Those of us present last Wednesday evening were treated to a further introduction to the Enneagram. But she'll treat all of us coming to our Labor Day Retreat to a more in-depth exploration of it.

Finally, last Sunday, when we worshipped outside, we spent time with perhaps the most famous saint of our day, Mother Teresa. We learned about her humble beginnings, her simple and clear sense of call to serve the poor, the magnetism of her work, the international awards and attention she received, and perhaps most importantly, her insistent that God calls each person to a service of love. "Keep the light of Christ burning in your heart," she said, "for Christ alone is the Way to walk; Christ alone, the Life to live; Christ alone, the Love to love." Mother Teresa consistently urged Christ's followers, not to leave everything in order to serve Calcutta's poor, but to listen in prayer to discern God's particular plan for each one of us, then to trust it, and then to act on it.

Mercy! This summer we trafficked with the lives and witness of *eleven* holy ones, each responding to the revelation of Jesus Christ in their own particular, peculiar, passionate, and persevering manner. Their lives were given to us as scripture, *embodied* scripture, offered for us to "exegete," or pull out, whatever meaning or inspiration or challenge, or even chastening, that grabbed us.

It's always interesting to hear stories about peoples' lives, isn't it? Especially when those stories are neatly summarized and organized around particular themes, the way I and other preachers did this summer. But don't be fooled. Most these folks' lives were just as messy and complicated as our own. It's only in retrospect that we, or even perhaps they, can make any sense, any divine sense, anyway, of their existence. And so it will be for us.

Yet perhaps in some of their lives, we have recognized a few of our own yearnings, or inclinations, or potential. Some quality we might like to cultivate, some new angle on how to be faithful in the world. At the very least, I hope we all noted the intentionality of this odd medley of Christian witnesses; the amount of energy and focus and even risk they devoted to being followers of Jesus Christ.

More important to me than their renown or accomplishment is the witness of these saints' unique blend of personal gifts, limitations, cultural milieu, and passion for God.

For each of us, in our baptism and confirmation, is called individually to a unique journey of faith. And if we're here this morning, we're called to share the journey with each other. The way I see it, God keeps messing with the mess we are, just in case we think we have the final word. Or just in case we get lazy. Or just in case we imagine that it's enough to show up to worship for an hour once a week. Because just in case anybody imagines that God appreciates your hour, or two, or four, or ten, at the church each week, the lives of the saints are a good reminder that, uh uh, God wants more from us. In fact, God wants every last bit of you and me, down to the last filled molar in your left cheek. That's *really* what the saints teach us. Most of 'em gave God

everything they had to give. And God took it, gladly, and then gave it back to them a hundred, a thousand, an *infinite* number of times, with great joy.

Friends, I only know to echo Paul's prayer for us – that God give each of us a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we come to know God, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we might know the hope to which God has called us, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe.

To the glory of God. Amen.