

**SLD08.27.06 21st Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Ephesians 1:15-23**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“A Summary of Saints”**  
(last in the series)

Back in mid June, I commenced a summer series of sermons about saints, because the lives of saints offer both a model and a challenge to those of us seeking to live the Christian life today. Whereas we of the Reformed tradition don't really regard one human as ultimately any more “saintly” than another, we welcome opportunities to observe how other God-smitten ones go about living into, and up to, authentic discipleship of Jesus Christ; at the very least, to broaden our imagination. So we turned this summer to a healthy handful of Spiritual Great Ones to witness both their sacrifices and their delights, their risks and their rewards, in the service of Jesus Christ.

Because we can hear about the gospel all we like. We can read scripture, listen to sermons, study in Church School and teach our children all about the fundamentals of faith. But what *really* impresses us is witnessing the gospel in action. No flapping of lips, no pointing of fingers, no laundry list of “shoulds and shouldn'ts.” Just the witness of a life. Or even a moment in a life. Actions speaking louder than words. Fruits that reveal faith. That's what really makes an impression.

And so this summer we've trafficked with nine individuals whose lives manifested some notable aspect of Christian discipleship, starting with that grand, 16<sup>th</sup> century, “Wild Woman of Avila,” Teresa, and her short, dark, intense

protégé, John of the Cross. We visited with young, brave, bold Mary, mother of Jesus, as well as, compliments of Carolyn Christie, Jesus' fictitious childhood pal, St. Biff. We listened to the testimonies of radical Dorothy Day of the 1940's, and radical Samuel Ajayi Crowther of the 1840's. We sojourned with 12<sup>th</sup> century Italian Christian romantics, Francis and Clare of Assisi, and contemporary, good-humored, American contemplative monk, Father Thomas Keating. An impressive, if somewhat random, potpourri of Christian witnesses whose lives and lessons, by way of bidding them adieu, I want briefly to highlight this morning.

Let us remember first St. Teresa of Avila, that fiery, passionate, brilliant individual with a peppery sense of humor, who spoke her mind freely to God and anyone else who happened to be listening. Educator, administrator, reformer, and mystic, Teresa was a remarkable woman for her, or any, day. But it was on her teaching about Christian prayer that we primarily focused. Theresa's goal for prayer was the "loving, experiential awareness of God." Not ideas about God in our head, or words about God on our lips, but a personal, intimate, and interior experience. And the key to this kind of awareness, Teresa explained, was "frequent and friendly solitary discourse with the One Whom we know loves us." Yet prayer was risky business to Teresa, requiring a "holy daring." "The mind must sink into the heart," she said, "and the heart must catch on fire!"

The heart of Teresa's colleague and confessor, scholarly, introverted John of the Cross, caught on fire, with painful and personal consequences. As Teresa's partner in reforming their Carmelite order, John paid an enormous

personal price in the form of harassment, rejection and torture. Yet it was the physical pain and existential agony that punctuated so much of John of the Cross's life that yielded his powerful insight into what he called the "Dark Night of the Soul." Viewing his agony and heartbreak through the lens of his faith, John came to regard the "dark night of the soul" as an integral season of all spiritual journeys, a time during which God works on the soul, "not through joy and light, but through sorrow and darkness." "To the person who seeks holiness," wrote John, "suffering is simply one of the aspects of love, rather than its absence."

From John of the Cross, we turned to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, regarding her not just as idealized woman and mother but as disciple, prophet and exemplar of faith. Noting Mary's courage, strength, and independent choice to become not just a vessel, but a *co-creator* of God's beginnings, we wondered together what God might be trying to seed in *us* these days, what God might be expecting us here at Emory Church, individually and corporately to nurture and bear to the world.

Next Carolyn Christie preached on Jesus' imaginary best friend in Christopher Moore's outrageous comedy, Lamb, St. Biff. Carolyn explained that in Moore's tale, Biff is the one person Jesus can count on to help figure things out, to lean on when things aren't going well, and to tell Jesus straight when he's doing something wrong. And in the comedic Lamb, Jesus, being fully human and all, messes up a lot. What Carolyn lifted for us is the risk and the blessing of the St. Biffs in our lives, the ones who love us faithfully but don't pull any punches when it comes to setting us straight.

From straight-talking Biff we journeyed to straight-dealing Dorothy Day, radical American social activist from the 1940's through the '70's. Via the Catholic Worker newspaper and communities she founded, Day tackled social injustices from World War II to segregation to intolerable industrial working conditions. Beyond lobbying for social justice, a chief enterprise of the Catholic Worker movement was, and is, to offer hospitality to strangers in Christ's name. But what Day was really aiming for was an entirely new social order based on the justice and charity of Jesus Christ.

Johnson Kinyua, pastor of our Kenyan fellowship, then lifted to us the extraordinary life of 19<sup>th</sup> century gifted African leader, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who rose from captured slavehood to become the first African Anglican Bishop. A man of lively intelligence and industry, Crowther studied languages and ministry, providing the first native Yoruban grammar book and translation of the Bible. What's more, through his personal humility and patient listening, Crowther successfully bridged the worlds of his native Yorubaland (Nigeria) and colonial Britain, as well as the religious cultures of Christianity and Islam in Africa. From Crowther's life can be drawn powerful lessons regarding cultural sensitivity, diversity and inclusiveness, as well as the perseverance of the human spirit in the face of institutionalized oppression.

Saints Francis and Clare spoke to us from their 12<sup>th</sup> century romantic age of wandering troubadours and quests for the Holy Grail, revealing the distinctly unromantic discomforts and sacrifices of their lives of faith. Living the life of a wandering mendicant, Francis was generally regarded as a "fool for Christ." Yet

the simplicity of his life and love were disarming, and his passion for God's creation, contagious; communities began to form around him and spread his example and teaching throughout Europe and the western world.

Clare was Francis' female counterpart, equally foolish, equally committed, equally determined to surrender her life to her beloved Jesus Christ. But the restrictions for women of Clare's society were relentless, and the conditions of her monastery, austere and demanding. Clare's life was one of longing for her family, for Francis, for Christ, for the felt presence of God. But through prayer and a difficult life, she learned that the heart is made pure by giving away, by sharing, releasing, and letting go.

And lastly came a contemporary witness, Father Thomas Keating, who introduced us to a modern day version of the ancient Christian practice of contemplative prayer. Through his example and teaching, as well as the establishment of an organization called Contemplative Outreach, Father Keating has become something of a national "guru" for the centering prayer movement. The simplicity and discipline of the centering prayer practice has captured the interest of seekers in many denominations who wish to open themselves to God's presence and action within.

Phew! Lessons from the lives of nine holy ones who responded to the revelation of Jesus Christ in their own particular, but invariably, persevering, ways! ? Of what value to us are the life journeys and lesions of these spiritual witnesses? What do you suppose we're meant to "take away"?

Perhaps in some of their lives a few of us recognized something of our own yearnings or inclinations. Or maybe some quality we admire, or to which we aspire. Some of us may have picked up a new angle or inspiration for faith; perhaps some were even drawn to learning more about centering prayer. But at the very least, I hope each of us noted in the lives of this odd medley of Christian witnesses their respective abilities to invent some new style of Christian witness in response to the needs and restrictions of their particular time in history. For every one of these “witnesses” is an “original;” a unique blend of personal gifts and limitations, cultural milieu, and passion for God.

I like to think that you and I are also called to some new style of witness for *our* particular time in history. Certainly our time in history is very different from theirs. In contrast even to Dorothy Day’s ‘40’s era in New York, never mind Teresa of Avila’s 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain, life in our time moves so much faster. Transitions are constant, and rapid; and lives tend to be lengthy. Unlike St. Clare, you and I live in an era in which the institution of traditional marriage is constantly challenged, many women work outside the home, and many children are raised by single parents. As opposed to Mary, Mother of Jesus’ 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, or even Samuel Crowther’s 19<sup>th</sup> Africa, today global economics rule local lifestyles, and instantaneous communication, and gratification, pervade our culture.

But if we cannot reproduce the rhythms or the lifestyles, the sacrifices or the rewards, of most of the “holy ones” we’ve reviewed, what, do you suppose, *is* the “new” style of Christian witness in our particular time in history. In what ways

would it delight God for you and me here at Emory Church to blend our personal gifts and limitations with our passion for God and our cultural milieu to serve one another and the world?

It's a question I want to press, not because I have the answer – no – that will be something you and I will keep discovering together – but because whatever it is, I have a feeling it's not going to look like business as usual. At least it never did for those nutty, noble, holy ones we've trafficked with this summer. And however great they may have been, they all gone now, and you and I, *we're* Christ's body on earth now.

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours, but mine; no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through Christ looks at the world, the feet with which Christ goes about doing good, the hands with which Christ blesses.” (St. Teresa) And as Christ's body, you and I are called to *embody* our own style of Christian witness, one that blends, authentically, our gifts, our passions, and our limitations, in service of the driving needs of our time.

But just what *is* our style of Christian witness here at Emory Church? For that matter, what's your style of Christian witness in your *own* life? Just how are you and I manifesting Christ's gospel in action in our time?

It's a question I never stop asking myself, or this church. A question this community has asked itself repeatedly over the last couple years. A question we'll be looking at in a different way during our upcoming Labor Day Retreat. And this is my prayer, the same as Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give us a spirit of

wisdom and revelation as we come to know God, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know what is 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. (Eph. 1:17-19)

To the glory of God. Amen.