

**SLD07.08.07 14<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Ephesians 3:14-20**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Caryll Houselander – Divine Eccentric”**

“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.’”<sup>1</sup>

Meet Caryll Houselander, oddball English lay mystic of the 1940’s and 50’s, and today’s “saint” (in quotes) for us to explore. Never heard of her? Me, neither. All year I gather names of extraordinary ones for us to meet during our Summer Saint Series. But I sure can’t recall when, where, or why I added the name of Caryll Houselander. At first I was clueless as to why she made it on the list. Until I got to know her better, that is. Then I came to like her...very much.

For one thing, Houselander was widely regarded as odd, and I personally relate to “odd.” Though Houselander wasn’t odd in that pious sort of way that all the “holy” ones seem a breed apart; rather she was odd in the sort of way that seemed a breed apart from other “holy ones.” For Caryll Houselander was known to swear, and tell off-color jokes. She chain-smoked and drank gin. Was not patient or kind or gentle. Suffered fools neither gladly, nor even tactfully, and was considered altogether...a difficult person.

But besides her earthy integrity, the other thing that draws me so strongly to this nutty, acerbic “saint” is her radical insistence that a) Christ is to be found in all people and

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

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 Provis Houselander, an attractive and athletic couple. Willmott was a skilled huntsman; "Gert" had played center court at Wimbledon. But little Caryll 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 distanced her parents.

When Caryll was six, her mother's conversion to Catholicism led to Caryll's baptism, if not her conversion to religious practices. "When I was a small child," Houselander writes in her book, The Reed of God, "someone for whom I had great respect told me never to do anything that Our Lady 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."<sup>2</sup> The period that followed was remembered by Houselander as a "persecution" of endless pious prayers devotions and practices, to which she never warmed.

At the age of nine, her parents permanently separated, her mother opened a boarding house, and Caryll was sent to the cloistered Convent of the Holy Child, where she was left 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, 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

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<sup>2</sup> [www.catholicauthors.com/houselander.html](http://www.catholicauthors.com/houselander.html)

weighed down by a crown of thorns. From this experience, she came to understand that Christ was suffering in this nun.

Still Houselander's attitude remained far from "saintly." In fact, she was not even particularly religious. Illness during her youth truncated her education and she was sent home to London. During her teens, she lived and worked at her mother's boarding house, an experience that only deepened a personal sense of isolation. Shy, retiring, unwell, Houselander also suffered with 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, even people I knew well." From her descriptions, it seems likely that Houselander suffered from panic attacks. For these and other oddities, she was soon pronounced, in the parlance of the day, a "neurotic."

So perhaps what happened on the way to market one day was simply a "neurotic episode." For when Caryll looked up, she saw in the sky "a gigantic and living Russian icon" – something she had certainly never seen before – 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." Soon after Caryll learned of the assassination of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II and saw from newspaper photos that it was Nicholas' face she'd seen on the suffering Christ.

Interesting, but still no motivation to pursue a pious life. And the institution of the church, well...one day, Houselander went to Sunday Mass and sat 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 think about sitting down in *any* of the four Oglesby pews!] Well, when the "owners" of the pew (in those days, people paid a "pew rent") asked Caryll to move, she flatly refused, until ushers came and dragged her out of the church!

Houselander's outraged response: "I will never come back. Forget it. You will never see me here again!"<sup>3</sup>

Yet, subsequently she was visited by still a third vision, this one occurring on a crowded subway train amid "all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging," and lasting several days. In this experience Houselander clearly saw Christ in each passenger, as she described him, "living in them dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them." Still she tucked her insights away and returned again to school, receiving a full scholarship for art school.

In 1945, Houselander took up work in an advertising office doing layout. She also found success drawing illustrations for books, and pursuing what would become her favorite artistic medium, carving wood. At one point she fell in love with a famous British spy, a shady character by the name of Sidney Riley, after whom Ian Fleming modeled his renowned fictional figure, James Bond. Riley, being the sort of fellow he was, ran off with another woman a year later, breaking Caryll's heart, which emotional wound she carried for the rest of her life.<sup>4</sup>

Much of Houselander's spare time during World War II was devoted to occupational therapy for both child refugees from the Continent, and shell-shocked soldiers. 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, began to send patients to her for healing. Her gift? Strauss said simply, "She loved them back to life."<sup>5</sup>

However, a priest whom she respected advised her to put away all other efforts and concentrate on her writing. While not willing to give up her work with mentally disabled children, Houselander did turn the remainder of her attention to what was to become an

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<sup>3</sup> [www.authorsden.com](http://www.authorsden.com), "The Faces of Forgiveness," by A.J. Garrotto

<sup>4</sup> Garrotto, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> [www.catholicculture.org/docs](http://www.catholicculture.org/docs), "Seeing Christ in All People," Karen Lynn Krugh.

astonishing literary career during her 15 books and 700 poems, short stories and articles gained tremendous popularity and acclaim for their honesty, insight and humor. Remarked one contemporary,

“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.”<sup>6</sup>

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

“If we look for Christ “only in the saints,” Houselander warned, “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.”

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

“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.”<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to many pious people who start with “the idea of preserving the good in people,” Catholic Houselander invariably began with the Calvinistic notion that “everything was in ruins.” “I do not expect to find people good,” she wrote, “but I expect to find Christ wounded in them, and of course that is what I do find.” And so it was with just such a radically accepting and non-judgmental attitude that Houselander regarded all humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Krugh, p.2, quote from Monsignor Ronald Knox.

<sup>7</sup> [www.theotodkops.org.uk](http://www.theotodkops.org.uk) “Caryl Houselander: Essential Writings,” p.1

“It’s easy to see Christ indwelling in saints and ‘imaginary people,’” she wrote, but far more difficult in “our own relations and our intimate friends. It’s always easier to see a finely carved Christ hanging on a gilded cross than it is to see him in our boss, our estranged sister or our enemy in war.”<sup>8</sup>

With such electrifying directness and simplicity, Houselander wrote not only of seeing the wounded Christ in every other human being, but also of seeing the wounded Christ in ourselves. If God forgives, loves and accepts us as we are, she advised, so ought we to forgive, love and accept ourselves, not only for our own sakes but for the sake of the community.

“The first exercise in simplicity is to accept oneself as one is,” she wrote. “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.”<sup>9</sup> And again,

“Each one has something to give all the others...and each owes it to all the others to be himself,” in order to supply what the other lacks. Indeed, to deny a person’s full humanity, Houselander went on to say, is to mutilate the Body of Christ.<sup>10</sup>

From her visions and experience of life, Houselander derived a virtual commandment for each person to drop all pretensions of sanctity and simply be who he or she is, not only for our personal integrity but for the integrity of the larger Body of Christ.

In the light of all the other “oughts” and “shoulds” of our faith, I find Houselander’s perspective rather refreshing. We spend so much time, at least I spend so much time, pushing and pressing and working to be something more than I am... a better mom, a better pastor, a better friend, sister, worker, citizen, disciple...all the time working with, and against, a seemingly infinite litany of internal and external 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?

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<sup>8</sup> [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com) “Neurotic Mystic,” p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Krugh, p.3

<sup>10</sup>“Neurotic Mystic,” p. 3.

What I hear Houselander saying is, “okay, so drop all that and just be you. Not only is it a 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, fully and genuinely, who we are.”

Puts me in the mind of a poem I came across once in a Holy Ground newsletter.

Went 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!<sup>11</sup>

That’s the kind of God Houselander is describing; One who says “Yes Yes Yes” 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. Not that this is an easy thing to understand or live into. She 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. 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.

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<sup>11</sup> Kaylin Haught, Holy Ground newsletter, Asheville, N.C., Dec. 2002.

“For we are ‘other Christs’,” insists Houselander. “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.”<sup>12</sup>

Through her personal sufferings and identification with the suffering Christ, Houselander certainly became another Christ in her healing compassion toward others. Yet just as certainly, she remained a difficult person, complicated, unpredictable, neurotic, a puzzling paradox. She preached a social gospel, but lived a virtual recluse. Felt an overwhelming sympathy for the world, but wielded a razor-sharp tongue and biting sense of humor. Saw Christ in all persons but tended to push herself to hard.

But if Houselander’s personality and daily life seem at odds with our preconceptions of what constitutes sanctity, still, as one writer notes, “there are too few saints with whom...people can identify. ...Their lives might inspire admiration but never a shock of recognition; awe but never giggles. The wonder of Caryll Houselander is in her willingness to see Christ in all people, to suffer with him in them, and to allow him to transform her flawed and goofy nature into a divine work of art.”<sup>13</sup>

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Krugh, p.5.

<sup>13</sup> [www.peregrina.com/caryll](http://www.peregrina.com/caryll) p.3.