

Helen Keller

Can you imagine a world with no sound and complete darkness? Let's try for a minute. Imagine that you are unable to see. Close your eyes if it helps. Now, imagine complete darkness. (pause) Even with our eyes closed, there is still light. The gift of sight.

Now let's try to block out all the sound. My voice, the creak from the pew, the traffic, the planes flying overhead, the rustle of bulletins. Shhhh. (Silent pause) Even in complete silence there is still the sound of your own breath (and the hum of the air conditioner). The gift of hearing.

I find it difficult to truly imagine what it would be like to be blind or deaf. Being blind scares me because I'm afraid of the dark. I wouldn't be thrilled about being deaf either – silence seems so quiet. Being both, to me, would be unnerving; I'm so independent that the loss of freedom would make me angry.

Well, our saint for today, Helen Keller, we all know was both blind and deaf. She was born on June 27, 1880 in Northwest Alabama, a happy and healthy child, and then at 19 months she got a fever that almost killed her. They're not sure what the fever was, but she

survived and was left without her vision and her hearing. She became an unruly child, acting out in rage. She threw violent temper tantrums where she'd scream and break things. When she was 6, her parents could no longer cope and started looking into what could be done for Helen. Helen's mother, Kate Keller, read an article written by Charles Dickens in American Notes about the miraculous work done with another girl, Laura Bridgeman, who was also deaf and blind. A specialist in Baltimore referred them to Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, whose true calling was working with deaf people. Mr. Bell recommended that the Kellers contact the Perkins Institution for the blind to request a teacher for Helen.

Anne Sullivan was offered the job even though she had no experience teaching deaf-blind mutes. Anne was a graduate from the Perkins Institution because she too had a vision problem. Hers was corrected by a series of operations which helped her to read regular print for short periods. Helen calls the day that Anne came to her "the most important day" in her life.

Now, we remember Helen's story from here based on the 1962 film "The Miracle Worker" starring Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke.

There have been remakes of the film over the years; but I think this one is the best. I remember the scene when Anne Sullivan has just arrived and the family sits down for dinner. Helen roams around the table and takes what she wants to eat from each plate while the family seems to ignore her. Anne Sullivan doesn't want to allow Helen to take food from her plate, which causes a temper tantrum from Helen. Anne requests that the family leave her with Helen and proceeds to spend hours teaching Helen to hold a spoon and fold a napkin. I remember this scene was very messy. When Anne leaves the dining room she is exhausted and announces that Helen can now feed herself with a spoon and fold her napkin. Helen's mother's reaction is awe – she can fold her napkin. In real life this all occurred over several months, not in a single afternoon.

The real miracle happened one day when Miss Sullivan and Helen were pumping water. Miss Sullivan all along had been "writing" words into Helen's palm, using the manual alphabet. On this day she wrote the word w-a-t-e-r. Helen made the connection to the word spelled into her hand and the wet, cool water running over her other hand. The miracle had occurred – Helen understood language. She

eventually was able to learn to speak, and reading became her window to the world. She even read in several languages.

Helen continued her education with Anne Sullivan by her side, and graduated from Radcliffe College becoming the first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor's degree. Helen started her writing career while she was still in college when she wrote *The Story of my Life* – her autobiography – which is what “The Miracle Worker” is based on. She wrote 12 books in all and several articles. She lectured, wrote articles and raised funds for the American Foundation for the Blind as her main employment.

During her lifetime, Helen received awards from countries all over the world, including Japan, Brazil, the Phillipines, Lebanon, France and the United States. Most of these awards were for her work for the blind. She visited 35 countries on five continents bringing encouragement to blind people everywhere she went. She was personal friends with many famous people including Charlie Chaplin, Alexander Graham Bell, and Mark Twain to name a few. She met all the presidents of the United States from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon

B. Johnson. She died in her sleep on June 1, 1968, a few weeks short of her 88th birthday.

That is the story we all know and love about Helen Keller, how she overcame her disabilities and prospered in spite of them. And if that isn't enough inspiration from one person, there's more to her story.

For instance, did you know that Helen Keller helped found the American Civil Liberties Union? Did you know that in January, 1916, she boldly spoke against American involvement in World War I? She pretty much said that the war was a way for industry to make more money and not about protecting America. And this at a time when people were being arrested for speaking against the war propaganda.

Did you know that she was a member and spokesperson of the Industrial Workers of the World, a forerunner of present day unions?

Did you know that she was a radical Socialist when it was extremely unpopular and that she picketed a theater in New York City? What about the fact she spent some time performing in vaudeville? Or that she was a follower of Swedenborgian theology known today as The Church of the New Jerusalem or simply The New Church?

At one point the editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, after finding out she was a Socialist, tried to emphasize her disabilities as weaknesses. She responded by describing a previous meeting with him:

“At that time the compliments he paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him. . . Oh, ridiculous Brooklyn Eagle! Socially blind and deaf, it defends an intolerable system, a system that is the cause of much of the physical blindness and deafness which we are trying to prevent.”

Helen Keller explained that her motivation for activism was because of her concern for blindness and other disabilities. Again, this is what she said:

“I was appointed on a commission to investigate the conditions of the blind. For the first time I, who had thought blindness a misfortune beyond human control, found that too much of it was traceable to wrong industrial conditions, often caused by selfishness and greed. . .”

My grandmother calls that gumption. Taking on industry, confronting others on their double standards, Helen Keller certainly had gumption.

In August, 1919, she was involved in the stagehands' and musicians' strike in New York City. She was scheduled to speak at the opening performance of a movie that was about her life. She refused to appear because the theater was associated with the Producing Manager's Association, which seemed to be exploiting actors, stagehands and musicians with unfair pay practices. She picketed with the actors in a parade down Fifth Avenue in support of their efforts for justice.

Helen Keller's religious beliefs were founded on the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th century Swedish scientist and theologian. Surprisingly enough, we heard last week that Johnny Appleseed also followed this theology. The New Church theology has a mystical sense to it and it advocates that "real joy comes from loving to do good things without wanting to be repaid." It has a spiritual interpretation of scripture and Christianity, which I think is what attracted Helen to it. Helen wrote about her beliefs in her book *My Religion*, republished later as *Light in my Darkness*. One of her

statements led me to our scripture reading today. This is what she wrote:

“Only by striving for what is beyond us do we win expansion and joy. Let us, then, take up that limitation which each one has, and follow the example of Him who bore upon his frail human shoulders the cross of the world, that he might become a luminous and inspiring influence, communicating life-giving thoughts and desires to the weak, the tempted and the despondent.”

Let us take up that limitation which each one has, and follow the example of Him. . . . Sounds a lot like what Jesus said – “take up your cross and follow me.”

What about this “take up your cross?” Traditionally, “take up your cross” has meant taking on the burden of Christianity or the walk to suffering and martyrdom for the sake of Christ. The focus seems to be on what we have to do, what we have to deal with, and it seems unpleasant. Tradition seems to forget the rest of the sentence. Take up your cross – and follow Jesus.

Helen’s definition of take up your cross is more refreshing and is about taking your limitations and following Jesus anyway. She is

referring to limitations like her blindness and deafness, my stage fright. Maybe age is a limitation (I'm too old or I'm too young). What about economic status? (I don't have enough money... Although I don't think anybody ever says "Sorry, can't help; I have too much money.") Helen Keller's definition of "take up your cross" is most definitely personal. Our whole being has to take up our cross.

Here's another idea from Donald E. Miller, Professor of Christian Education and Ethics at Bethany Theological Seminary. He writes that Luke shifts the meaning of "take up your cross" from a single heroic act (like martyrdom) to a continuing attitude, a daily willingness to accept whatever hardships and suffering come with service to others.

The emphasis from both Miller and Helen Keller reminds us that the personal taking up of our cross is followed by "and follow me." We're meant to take up whatever limitations, struggles and consequences that are our lives and follow the example of Jesus. Not necessarily to the death – follow Jesus so others can experience the light and inspiration that Helen Keller talks about.

Here is how Helen Keller overcame her limitations:

“Once I knew the depth where no hope was, and darkness lay on the face of all things. Then love came and set my soul free. Once I knew only darkness and stillness. Now I know hope and joy. Once I fretted and beat myself against the wall that shut me in. Now I rejoice in the consciousness that I can think, act and attain heaven. But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.” It was the love and persistence of Anne Sullivan that gave Helen the tools to do everything she did – to bear her cross, to push the limitations and spread the message “yes, you can” around the world.

Perhaps the key to taking up our cross is in the example of Anne Sullivan: loving others with what we have instead of focusing on what we don't have.

Perhaps taking up our cross means sharing our hope so others can find love in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps taking up our cross is seen in Helen's boldness to speak out for what she believed in, even when it was dangerous.

Perhaps taking up our cross is recognizing our limitations and pushing past them to reach out, to break down barriers that blind us to the needs of others.

Helen Keller's life reflects our scripture passage "take up your cross". Her cross was her blindness and deafness, obstacles which she climbed over. "And follow Jesus" – she worked to better the conditions of an industrial society that exploited people, including children. She helped blind and deaf people around the world realize dreams. Not out of selfish gain, but simple caring.

The point is not the cross that we bear, it's what we do in spite of it that matters and the "and follow Jesus" part. Jesus didn't say, "Sorry, can't make it to Jerusalem this year. It's too scary for me." Or "Nope, I think it's better not to touch those lepers. I might get infected." He didn't turn away folks who were demon possessed or sick because he was in a bad mood. He healed the blind and the deaf, he gave hope to the poor, he redeemed our lives – not because it was fun or because there was something in it for him, but just because he loved us.

Helen Keller followed Jesus' example by advocating for the poor and the marginalized just because she cared about others and wanted to help – and she did it in complete darkness and utter silence. She recognized what others with sight couldn't see. She heard the cry of the oppressed that others wouldn't hear. Can you imagine what we can do when we shrug off our blindness and deafness – and follow Jesus?

To the glory of God, Amen.