

SLD07.23.06 16th Ordinary
Matthew 25:31-46
EPC
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Dorothy Day (1897-1980) – A Life Aligned With the Gospel”

Most of you are well introduced by now to the fact that worship this summer revolves around the lives of “saints,” in quotation marks – some canonized, some not – but people who found and followed a way to live out the gospel in their lives. So far we’ve heard from Teresa of Avila about her great passion for God and from her colleague John of the Cross and his insights about a seeker’s experience of the absence of God. We’ve listened to the church’s spin on Mary, mother of God, through these ages and what a powerhouse of a model she is today for those who wish to partner with God in bearing God to the world. Last week, Johnson Kinyua preached about Bishop Samuel Crowther and the character and faith of a 19th century African man captured by slave traders who became a bishop in the Anglican Church.

Today we will visit with Dorothy Day, radical social activist from the 40’s through the 70’s, and Scott has agreed to help me out.

Dorothy Day, Founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1897. Long before her death in 1980, Day found herself regarded by many as a saint.¹

"Don't call me a saint! I don't want to be dismissed that easily!" *

Indeed, Dorothy Day did not consider herself a saint. Yet her life resonates as one aligned with the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially as described in today’s text from Matthew 25. Certainly Day dedicated all the efforts and energy of her adult life to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger. And a

¹ Unless otherwise noted, most of the material in this ‘readers’ sermon’ comes from “A Biography of Dorothy Day,” from the Catholic Worker Home Page, www.catholicworker.com pp. 1-7. 7/10/2006.

retrospective of her earlier days reveals some of the ways God prepared her for her ministry.

"When I was little, my world turned upside down. And I mean, literally. Everything familiar to me was turned topsy turvey; that is, everything that wasn't burned up in the fire. It was 1906 and we were living in San Francisco, and you know what happened then, don't you? No? You don't know about the San Francisco earthquake of 1906? It was awful. So much was destroyed, mostly by the fires all over the city. My family lost everything. We ended up moving to Chicago to a tenement in the South Side, which wasn't very nice. It was a big step down in the world for my Dad, and he was sad a lot."

That was the beginning of Day's understanding of the shame people feel when all their efforts fail.

"I hurt for my Dad and all, but, you know, I was just a kid and I liked Chicago okay. There are a lot of Catholics in Chicago. My family wasn't Catholic but a lot of my friends were. One day I went over to a friend's house and when I went in, there was her mom praying on her knees by her bed. And she just looked up and told me where my friend was, and then went right on back to praying! I mean, she wasn't embarrassed or anything! That really made an impression on me."

"Eventually my dad got a job working for the newspaper as a sports editor. I guess it was from my Dad that I learned to like writing so much. And reading. One of the books that was really important to me as I was growing up was Upton Sinclair's novel, The Jungle. Do you know it? It's that raw story about a family from Lithuania who comes to Chicago to seek their fortune. But all of them end

up working practically like slaves at the most disgusting meatpacking plants, even the dying father and the pregnant wife and all the kids. The conditions they worked in were so filthy and dangerous – you don't even want to know what was swept into the sausages. Anyway, a lot of the characters die and the ones that live become tramps and prostitutes. What Sinclair was really writing about was the crooked politics in Chicago and the way that Capitalism makes the rich, richer and the poor, destitute. Sinclair's answer was Socialism, and I agreed with him. I read that book again and again; it really grabbed my heart."

Sinclair's The Jungle inspired Day to take long walks in poor neighborhoods in Chicago's South Side, the start of a life-long attraction to areas many people avoid, even while developing a capacity for discovering the hidden beauty in those places.

"And all that reading and writing of mine helped me get a scholarship to college. But really, most of college struck me as foolishness. I just didn't feel like dallying around socializing. Nor did I want my Dad to have to support me. So, mostly I read a lot of radical social stuff, and worked to keep myself in groceries."

But after a couple years, Day had had enough of college. What she really wanted to do was to get out in the world and make a difference. So she dropped out of college and moved to New York, where she found a job as a reporter for "The Call," New York's only Socialist daily.

"I covered rallies and demonstrations and interviewed labor organizers and agitators. Now *those* were my kind of people - people who put their lives on the line for what they believed."

But then Dorothy got in trouble.

“Oh, you probably think I got pregnant or something, right? But that wasn’t it. You tell ‘em.”

The year was 1917 and Dorothy got a job working for The Masses, a magazine that opposed American involvement in World War I. In September of that year, the Post Office refused to continue mailing the magazine. Subsequently, federal officers seized all its manuscripts, subscriber lists and files, charging five of its editors with sedition.

"And then, a couple months later, I joined forty other women for a protest in front of the White House because we *still* weren't being allowed to vote, and I got arrested. We all did. And they were rough on us, too. Sent us out to this workhouse out in the country and manhandled us and tried to keep us quiet. So you know what we did? Went on a hunger strike. Got some press, too. Especially after they roughed us up trying to force feed us.

“Have any of you seen the movie Iron Jawed Angels? It’s all about that time. In the end, the press was so bad, the President (Woodrow Wilson at the time) ordered us freed. Gave us the vote, too. Bet a lot of you women take voting for granted now. But, boy heidy, not back then. We fought hard for the right to vote; paid a big price for it, too.

"Anyway, after that whole experience, I can tell you that just *writing* against the war didn't seem like near enough of a response to the devastation of it. So I signed up for a nurses' training program in Brooklyn to see if I could help out in some way. I wanted to do *something* to help change things!"

After the war Dorothy began writing again as a reporter and a novelist. She also began a four-year common-law marriage with Forster Batterham, an anarchist opposed to both marriage and religion. In a world of such cruelty, Batterham found it impossible

to believe in God. When Day became pregnant with their daughter and had her baptized in the Catholic Church, there was a permanent break with Batterham.

“For me and my daughter “to become Catholic meant for me to give up a mate with whom I was very much in love. Forster had all the love of the English for the outdoors...his ardent love of creation brought me to the Creator of all things. But when I cried out to him, ‘How can there be no God, when there are all these beautiful things? He turned from me uneasily.

“I speak of the misery of leaving one love. But there was another love too, the life I led in the radical movement.”²

From that point forward in her life, Day tried to find a way to bring together her religious faith and her radical social values.

"I didn't want to be Communist, though I appreciated their position on jobs and health care and housing. But Communists don't believe in God and I do, passionately! I offered up a special prayer, a prayer that came with tears and anguish, that some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor."

The very next day, in her apartment in New York, Day met Peter Maurin, a French immigrant 20 years her senior. A former priest, Maurin embraced poverty as a vocation and led a life of study, prayer and service. Out of his life a vision had emerged of a social order instilled with basic values of the Gospel. "Start a paper," Maurin told Day. "Start a paper to publicize Catholic social teaching. You could do that, Dorothy. You *should* do it. What better way to spread the word! What better way to use your gifts to transform society!"

² Fem-Biography: Dorothy Day, www.fembio.org/women/dorothy-day, p. 2.

“So I did. I found a printer that could produce 2,500 copies of an eight-page tabloid paper for \$57 and decided to sell the paper for a penny a copy. So cheap anyone could buy it.”

On May 1st, 1933, the first copies of *The Catholic Worker* were handed out on Union Square in New York City. By December, 100,000 copies were being printed each month. Readers found a unique voice in *The Catholic Worker* expressing dissatisfaction with the social order and challenging both urbanization and industrialization. The paper was not only radical but religious, even conservative in its doctrine. But it didn't merely complain or blame about conditions but called on its readers to make personal responses.

"At first it was just a newspaper but you know, then, when winter came in earnest, so did the homeless people. Peter kept writing essays about renewing the ancient Christian practice of hospitality to the homeless. Remember how Jesus said 'I was a stranger and you took me in?' Well, most Christians I knew only took care of their family and friends. But Peter said every home and every church ought to have its 'Christ Room' that was dedicated to the needs of strangers.”

Taking Maurin's words to heart, Day and some friends rented an apartment with space for ten women. Then they organized an apartment for some men, and then expanded to a house in Greenwich Village. In 1936 Day and others interested in this kind of work and way of life moved into two buildings in Chinatown but so many people came, there was never enough room.

“Mostly they were men, grey men, the color of lifeless trees and bushes and winter soil, who had in them as yet, none of the green of hope, the rising sap of faith.”

One thing surprising about these Catholic Worker communities was that no one set about trying to reform or convert their guests. Only a crucifix on the wall was evidence of the faith of the hosts. Everyone who worked at the community received only food, board and occasional pocket money. By 1936, there were 33 Catholic Worker houses. Due to the Depression there were plenty of people needing them.

"Not everybody appreciated our communities, of course. Some said, 'didn't Jesus say the poor would always be with us?' And others, 'hey, these aren't even 'the deserving poor!' How long do you plan to put up these drunkards and good-for-nothings?' Well, I told them, we let them stay forever. They live with us, and they die with us, and we give them a Christian burial. Once we take them in, they become members of the family. Or rather, as brothers and sisters in Christ, they always *were* our family. Anyway, I told them, the class structure is *our* making, and by *our* consent, not God's. We urge *revolutionary* change.

"The vision is this: We are working for 'a new heaven and a new earth, wherein justice dwelleth.' We are trying to say with action, "Thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven. What we're working for is a Christian social order!"³

Truly, Day's Catholic Work Movement was a radical fusion of activism and faith.⁴ Only the balance of her radical social beliefs with conservative doctrinal views that prevented her from being censured by the Catholic Church. What finally *did* get Day into trouble was pacifism at the time America was entering WW II.

"He's right, of course. But I'll tell you what, as far as I'm concerned, a nonviolent way of life is at the very heart of the Gospel, don't you agree? Didn't Jesus say, 'put away your sword, for whoever lives by the sword shall perish by

³ "Aims and Purposes" by Dorothy Day, *The Catholic Worker*, Feb. 1940, 7. available at www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=182.

⁴Fem-Biography – Dorothy Day., p.1

the sword? Well, the first piece on pacifism that we printed was this dialogue between a so-called 'patriot' and Jesus, with the 'patriot' dismissing Jesus' teaching as a noble but impractical doctrine. It was not a popular piece."

The strongest reaction against the pacifist position of *The Catholic Worker* occurred after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and America declared war.

"But listen, our opposition to the war had nothing to do with sympathy for America's enemies. We love our country! We're the only country in the world where men and women of all nations have taken refuge from oppression. It's just that we believe in works of mercy rather than works of war."

Young men who identified with the Catholic Worker movement during the World War II generally spent much of those years either in prison, or in rural work camps. Some did unarmed military service as medics.

The world war ended in 1945, but out of it emerged the cold war, the nuclear-armed 'warfare state,' and a series of smaller wars in which America was often involved. One of the rituals of life for the New York Catholic Worker community beginning in the late 1950s was the refusal to participate in the state's annual civil defense drill.

"Well, I just saw it as an attempt to promote nuclear war as survivable, and winnable, neither of which it is, and to justify spending billions of dollars on the military. So when the sirens sounded on June 15, 1955, we just refused to run and hide (as though it would have done any good anyway.) Instead we just sat outside on the steps of City Hall."

The first year the dissidents were reprimanded. The next year Day and others were sent to jail for five days. The following year, the judge jailed her for thirty days. And so it went until 1960, when instead of just a handful of people coming to City Hall,

500 showed up. In 1961, the crowd swelled to 2,000, and the City of New York decided to end their "dress rehearsals for nuclear war."

Another emphasis of *The Catholic Worker* community, especially in the 50's and 60's, was the Civil Rights Movement.

"You know, we were always on the lookout for people who were setting an example. So we visited the Koinonia community in Americus, Ga., founded by Clarence Jordan, because blacks and whites lived together peaceably there. (Remember how y'all heard about Koinonia and Jordon last year?) Now *that* visit was an experience. It was 1957 and the community was under attack. One of the community houses had been hit by machine-gun fire and the Ku Klux Klan were burning crosses on community land. One day when I was taking my turn at the sentry post, there was this car approaching and slowing down, and something made me duck, which is a good thing because right that moment a bullet struck the post right in front of my face."

Not long after that came the Vietnam War. Day and her community had been lobbying the Catholic Church to issue a clear statement regarding war. How they celebrated the proclamation of the Second Vatican Council that any act of war "directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants" was a crime against God and humanity. For "indiscriminate destruction of vast areas with their inhabitants" were the order of the day in many regions of Vietnam. Nearly everyone in Catholic Worker communities took part in protests, with many going to prison for acts of civil disobedience.

In fact, there's probably never been a newspaper so many of whose editors have been jailed for acts of conscience. Day herself was last jailed in 1973 for taking part in a banned picket line in support of farm workers.

"And I was 75 years old. Ha!"

Indeed, Day lived long enough to see her achievements honored. In 1967, when she made her last visit to Rome, she found she was one of two Americans - the other an astronaut - invited to receive Communion from the hands of Pope Paul VI. On her 75th birthday, a Jesuit magazine devoted a special issue to her, finding in Day the individual who best exemplified "the aspiration and action of the American Catholic community during the past forty years." Among those who came to visit her when she was no longer able to travel was Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who had once pinned on Day's dress the cross worn only by fully professed members of the Missionary Sisters of Charity.

"Yes, well, for all that, like I said, don't even think about calling me a saint. I really don't want to be dismissed that easily. Anyway, I was way too radical for most people's tastes. I certainly was for those Nobel Peace Prize folks. The way I see it, if I've really achieved anything in my life, it's because – like that mom of my friend's back in Chicago? - I learned how not to be embarrassed to talk about God."

Today the Catholic Worker movement flourishes with support from many faiths and denominations. Our own Open Door Community at 910 Ponce de Leon, founded and run by two Presbyterian ministers, is a member of this movement. Hear now this summary of the mission of the Catholic Worker movement today:

"The aim of the Catholic Worker movement is to live in accordance with the justice and charity of Jesus Christ. ...This aim requires us to begin living in a different way. We recall the words of our founders, Dorothy Day, who said

"God meant things to be much easier than we have made them."

and Peter Maurin who wanted to build a society, quote, “where it is easier for people to be good.”

When we of the Catholic Worker Movement examine our society, which is generally called capitalist (because of its methods of producing and controlling wealth) and is bourgeois (because of prevailing concern for acquisition and material interests, and its emphasis on respectability and mediocrity), we find it far from God’s justice... in *economics*...

In labor. In *politics*. **In morals.** In *the arms race*. And so, out a vision of a society where the good of each member is bound to the good of the whole in the service of God, we advocate:

Personalism – a philosophy grounded on the freedom and dignity of each person, that requires the taking of personal responsibility for changing conditions.

A decentralized society – to encourage efforts such as family farms, rural and urban land trusts, food, housing and other cooperatives – any effort in which money is put back in its place and human beings are no longer commodities.

A green revolution – that encourages self-sufficiency through farming, crafting and appropriate technology. A new society in which people rely on the fruits of their own toil and work mutually to resolve conflicts.

With Christ as our Exemplar, we strive for practices of

Nonviolence – for Jesus taught us to take suffering upon ourselves rather than inflict it upon others.

Works of mercy – for at the heart of the Gospel are clear mandates for our response to “the least of our brothers and sisters.”

Manual Labor – for besides inducing cooperation and overcoming barriers between sisters and brothers, manual labor enables us to use our bodies as well as our hands and minds.

Voluntary poverty – “The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, by making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge and belief in love.”

However, in all these aims, (in unison) **we must be prepared to accept seeming failure, for sacrifice and suffering are part of the Christian life. Success, as the world determines it, is not the final criterion for judgments. The most important thing is the love of Jesus Christ and how to live His truth.**

To the glory of God. Amen.