

SLD06.01.08 9th Ordinary Intro to Saints
Matthew 7:21-29
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

Anam Cara (Soul Friend)

Jesus' message to the crowd that day, and this day, is pretty clear. Those who hear his words and act on them are rock-solid in their faith; those who hear his words and don't act on them are pissing in the wind. Those who manage somehow to integrate the gospel into their everyday lives enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who think God's talking to somebody else don't get past the pearly gates, not now, not later. (Well... maybe later, since our gracious good sport of a God sent Jesus to redeem saint and sinner alike.)

But meanwhile, those who genuinely take in the gospel and let it alter their engine and determine not only what they drive, but what direction and speed, Jesus is for 'em. Those who hear and hear and hear and pray and pray and pray but do nothing about it, well, you heard what Jesus said: "I will declare to them, I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers!"

So which are we here at Emory Church? Hearers or Doers?

The way I see it, most of us fall somewhere in between. And there's a reason for that. It's not that we're unfaithful, or even mediocre Christians. We're just people. People caught up like everybody else in our age, our era, our culture, our drama, our doubt, our pain, the endless dreams and disappointments and demands of our lives. And the transformation required to empty ourselves out, to die to who we are and what we want, to love everybody like ourselves, and to do whatever God tells us to do, is... well...it's really hard.

So most of us don't do it all that well. Or at least, all that thoroughly.

But those of us who at least to TRY to stumble along a spiritual path, committing to a gaggle of fellow bozos on our spiritual bus, those of us who at least make a stab at regular personal prayer, and show up to worship God, and do what we can for our community of passengers and anybody else who wants to climb on board, or, for that matter, anyone who's even just standing around wondering where we're headed, well, you gotta admire our intention, if not our results.

And on the odd occasion when there really ARE measurable results, like a Fall Festival, or a prettied-up fellowship hall, or somebody joining the church, or somebody hooking up a rain barrel, or inviting a neighbor to worship, or going on a mission trip, or maybe just having a heart-bursting moment of unfettered gratitude for the blessings of God that they can't help sharing, then you gotta look up at heaven and say, "See? We're not just hearers here at Emory; we're doers, too," and feel pretty proud of ourselves.

But most of the time, we have to admit, most of the time there are not just a whole lot of clear, observable, quantifiable results of our faith. Partly that's just the nature of spiritual journeys. But in large part it's because most of the time most of the rooms of most of our houses are pretty much built on the shifting sand of just about everything else *besides* the rock of the gospel.

Want to know what it'd look like if all of the time all the rooms of all of our houses were built squarely on the rock of the gospel? Well, it'd look pretty much like Jesus, which goes to show you how far from *him* we are.

And what would it look like if most of the time most of the rooms of most of our houses were built pretty close to the rock of the gospel? Well, that'd look like the people we call "saints," the ones who are not, at least to us Protestants, perfect, or holier than me or thou, but whose lives offer witness that the gospel can, in fact, be lived, on earth, in the present, and in the flesh, by any extraordinary or pitiful or average human being who risks both hearing AND acting on what Jesus has to say.

Myself, I never tire of discovering and hearing stories about people like that. Believe me, I know as well as anybody how hard a genuine life of discipleship is; I just like to hear about folks who have done it better than I have. Or differently. Or to some great end. Or simply, to the greater glory of God.

On my good days, I want to be like that. On my bad days, I pretty much just want to grump around the house. But on my good days, I really do wish I could so integrate what Jesus says into my being and actions that I could become fully who, what and how God intends me to be. I want that for all of us. Which is why, every summer for the last 7 or 8 years, I've preached a series of sermons on "saints" in quotes, to remind us that, with different choices and maybe building materials, you and I can be "saints," too.

You know the kind of people I choose – sometimes canonized ones, sometimes the fellow down the street – who, in one way or another, prove by their hearing and their doing that it's not impossible to live the gospel out in one's life and lifetime.

But I never can seem to launch into our summer saint series without a brief reminder about the Reformed tradition we hail from and where it stands on the matter of specially tapped holy ones. The early Reformers had some pretty strong feelings about how saints were regarded in their 16th century day and I have no intention of ignoring or

dishonoring them. But it wasn't that Luther, Calvin and Zwingli didn't *esteem* these inspiring figures of Christian history; they just weren't too keen on when people's esteem and reverence evolved into outright *worship* of the saints. This was anathema, or totally against four theological principles essential to the Reformers, which remain essential to us today.

The first is *Soli Deo Gloria*...which means "worship God alone." Not saints, not idols, not even the doctrines and traditions of the church. Worship belongs only to God.

The second is *Mediator Dei*, or the Mediator of God, who, to the Reformers was Jesus Christ alone, the only one who reveals to Christians the nature of God and opens and invites us to genuine relationship with the divine. Praying to saints, the Reformers felt, detracted from the sole mediatorship of Christ, and they wanted people to quit doing it.¹

A third essential principle to the Reformed tradition, then and now, is *Justificatio*, Justification, which has to do with how one achieves personal salvation before God. There was a popular belief in the 16th century that the saints, having accumulated more merit than they needed for personal salvation, might, if you prayed to them effectively, share some of their surfeit merit with one's own flagging account.

Well, believing as they did that salvation is by grace alone, the Reformers basically thought this spin on a saintly savings account was nuts. Anyway, they preached, if anybody has any merit to spare, it'd be Jesus Christ, who distributes it freely for the salvation of everybody.

¹ Ibid. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Vols 20-21. Library of Christian Classics. Ed. John T. McNeill. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, 2.8.25.

The last principle at stake for the Reformers around the matter of saints was *Communio Sanctorum*, or the ranking of sins or degrees of holiness. You can imagine how Luther and Calvin felt about *that!* I mean, how many times do you have to hear Calvin's word that before God, *all* people are equally depraved, and *all* people, by grace through faith, equally justified. (Eph. 2:8).² For the Reformers, any sort of human ranking of sins or conferring of holiness was balderdash, and to this day we of the Reformed tradition do our best to avoid doing it.

But...no sense throwing out the baby with the bath water.

To be sure, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli had no time for all that statuary and candles and praying to St. Jude for impossible causes. But as early as 1561, reformed theologian Henry Bullinger wrote in the II Helvetic Confession that (quote):

We acknowledge (the saints) to be living members of Christ and friends of God who have gloriously overcome the flesh and the world. Hence we love them as brothers (and sisters) and also honor them. For... we earnestly desire to be imitators of their faith and virtues...to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ... (Therefore)...the remembrance of saints, at a suitable time and place is to be profitably commended to the people in sermons, and the holy examples of the saints set forth to be imitated by all.³

So, that's what we're fixing to do, you and I – remember and learn about and honor, and maybe even make a stab at imitating the qualities of, a handful of summer saints who this year include African American abolitionist Sojourner Truth; African American song writer, attorney, and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson; Jesus' friend and first evangelist Mary Magdalene; Indian Christian mystic Sadhu Sundar Singh; radical socialist Helen Keller (who

² [Hungryhearts](#), p.2

³ [Book of Confessions](#), 5.026, 5.226 (II Helvetic Conf).

knew?); Sufi mystic Jallaludin Rumi; animal rights activist Phyllis Wright; and wandering 19th century evangelist and sower of good deeds Johnny Appleseed.

It's an interesting line-up. All year long God sends names and personalities to me, some through you, and it's always a surprise who shows up.

The holy example of the ones I've named, plus a few others, will be profitably commended to you this summer for us to imitate, should we be so moved. (I realize, for example, that not everybody can relate to wandering around India half naked and barefoot, begging for food and preaching the saving grace of Jesus Christ to a bunch of dyed-in-the-cotton Hindus.)

But hey, who knows? Maybe in one of these great, or at least, really good, ones, you or I will recognize an *Anam Cara* – Gaelic for “soul friend” – who might act as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide along our own journey of faith.⁴

Author John O'Donohue remarks in his book by that name, *Anam Cara*, that there is a fierce hunger for spirit in all our hearts (Ibid, p.5). And who knows but that somewhere along this summer's line-up, you or I might recognize some holy one whose hearing of Jesus' words sounds like ours, whose understanding of the gospel intersects your or my understanding, whose actions somehow challenge our own. Maybe some of us will even be moved to reinforce the foundation of some of the rooms of some of our houses, at least, some of the time. You know, maybe replace some of that shifting sand with solid rock. The rock of the gospel. And if that happens, who knows what might come next?

⁴ Diane Covington, “The Unseen Life That Dreams Us, John O'Donohue on the Secret Landscapes of Imagination and Spirit,” The Sun, April 2007, p. 5.

To the glory of God. Amen.