

Unnotable Saints

Matthew 23:1-12

If you are one who grew up Roman Catholic, it goes without saying that the Church today is not quite what you once knew. Pope Francis has made his mark in the 18 months since his installation with words, actions, and emphases that have startled, not only the Vatican establishment, but much of the world. He has taken on the institutional imperial order and acted like a reformer from within. I, like many, am quite taken by him.

Francis has been more candid with his theological and moral opinions than virtually any of his predecessors. He has expressed more openness to and acceptance of those outside the Church and other religions and faiths than pontiffs of the past. He has made pastoral overtures to the LGBTQ communities and started a dialogue about their place in the church. He has refused the glorious grandeur of his position on the throne of St. Peter in favor of the modest, ordinary living standards of a parish priest. It makes you wonder whether the College of Cardinals had any sense of what was about to happen when they elected a religious iconoclast and social progressive such as he is as the *voce principale* of St. Peter's Square!

One of the interesting developments of Pope Francis' liberalizing effect has been perspectives of young Catholics now re-embracing their faith, yet not in the conventional manner of their parents or reflecting traditional views of the Church. One example is in the online and satellite radio media ministry called, "Busted Halo"—"a place where twenty- & thirtysomethings discuss the intersection of faith, culture, politics & life". Produced by the

Paulists, it is a mix of podcasts and blogs with irreverent humor and farce, similar to the silliness you'd get on NPR's "Car Talk" or "Saturday Night Live," but addressing matters of faith intersecting with social concerns. It's mainly intended for disaffected Catholics and others who are burdened by the weight of religious institutions and traditional practices, but enlightened by matters of faith and spirituality.

One of their podcasts I've enjoyed listening to is called, "Saints of Our Lives"—again, an irreverent telling of the stories of some of the 10,000 or more canonized saints in the form of old-fashioned serial dramas and radio soap operas. Each story told explains the individual's life and how they became such a revered example of the faith, but done with an almost improvisational style of comedy. It's very entertaining. You can look them up online at their website (www.bustedhalo.com) or turn to the Catholic channel on Sirius satellite radio to catch their daily shows.

What I find intriguing about the programs I've listened to is how different these stories sound from the ones written in conventional devotional literature. As you might imagine, there are no halos or pious sanctimony about these characters of history, though there is a consistent mention of their humility and service to humanity. I've listened to a few of the stories, and it seems to me the producers of show intend for the audience to hear how these saints of the Church are not holier-than-thou—markedly different from the average person—but rather they are ordinary people who became remarkable practitioners of the faith. This would be something new to a Catholic following since, traditionally, Catholics have viewed

their saints like demigods—as spiritual mediators removed from the world to and through whom one should pray. These younger seekers are opting for a view of saints in their mortal dress as a touchstone for a faith fully engaged with the world.

I find all of this refreshing, since I've never been drawn to the religious practice of canonizing people. Being a bit of an iconoclast myself in a free-church setting, I'm more interested in the human drama of these characters than in placing them on a pedestal and idolizing them out of pious reverence. In my view, presenting saints in their perfected states, of course, hides the imperfections of their authentic characters and personalities which would make them real and, in many ways, useful as spiritual guides and mentors for the rest of us. When they are robbed of their human qualities and flaws, when they become romanticized and idealized, then the incarnate love and grace of God means very little to us. Who needs grace when you're perfect?

Those of you who have been a part of our Tuesday night study of II Corinthians have a sense of what I'm talking about. We have become acutely aware of the driven passion, personality traits, and less-than-appealing inconsistencies in the Apostle Paul who, of course, is revered throughout Christianity, in some cases, more than Jesus himself. I've been among many people throughout my career who hold Paul and his letters in such high esteem that to make any comment that discredits the man or questions what he said is met with immediate indignation and defiance that this is the word of God and God's chosen messenger and who am I to be in a position to judge? It seems to matter little to them that Paul, himself, made the

powerful point to the Corinthians that God's grace was sufficient for him, which is to say he must have recognized his own faults, shortcomings, and vulnerability to criticism—which he certainly received from many of his peers.

The question for us is, are we to whitewash or erase the truth about people—even those who are beloved as saints? If so, what's the benefit in doing that? Most of us who have been studying religion and history for awhile know there's not a single character in any religious tradition or in the Bible whose words or deeds couldn't be subject to review and question. Even Jesus said and did a few things we might wonder about (we just express our disagreement with him by not obeying his teachings!).

The point is, what we have in our sacred texts are the well-polished stories of human beings who are very likely to have limited perspectives and personality blemishes (even though they may be inspired by God), just like the rest of us. It's not disrespectful to acknowledge this, or to disagree with them and wrestle with the word to glean something from it. For God to speak to us today, it has to be authentic and real and meaningful—not merely the stuff of fairy tales and legends.

Frankly, I take our lectionary passage from Matthew in a similar vein. The entire 23rd chapter of Matthew is a very uncomfortable passage to read if you're not a fan of verbal abuse, simply because the words of Jesus spare no venom in his criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. This morning we're only examining the easy part; the seven woes which follow are difficult to digest given their stinging and harsh condemnation of the Judean religious leadership.

Unfortunately, the dark legacy of Christian history includes times when these words of Jesus have been used to justify anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews. As a Jew himself, that would have hardly been the intentions of Jesus.

When Jesus railed into the Pharisees and scribes citing their hypocrisy, it was to take them down from their self-acclaimed pedestals, as if they, as religious leaders, were deserving of special privileges and recognition for their elevated status in society and spiritual standing before God. Jesus' critique is not one of Judaism per se, as it was of religious hierarchy and institutional hypocrisy—the very same things that critics today cite in the religious establishment and many of our faith communities. Public demonstrations of inauthentic piety almost always end up betraying the message, making faith to be merely a matter of rituals and practices empty of meaning and theologies of self-preservation instead of self-sacrificing service. But clearly, the complaint Jesus was making in illustrating the intention of faith was that it was meant to reflect service to others, not separation from them.

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Being a humble servant to others lies at the heart of what I think it means to be a saint; it's not about being perfect or pious in character or even extraordinary. In the primitive church, anyone who embraced the message of the Gospel and the notion of servanthood reflected the character of Jesus and was considered a believer, a follower of the Way, a *hagios*—a saint. What set them apart was their

hope and belief and trust that God was at work in them and through them, beginning with Jesus, to heal and transform the world.

This sense of humble service, rather than piety, as the primary characteristic of saints allows us then to expand, rather than limit, our notion of who qualifies as saints. Rather than semi-divine mediators, they are meant to be human mentors; instead of being the extraordinary, they are among the ordinary in life. When we celebrate the saints of our lives, we may find some of the most important ones are fairly unnoticeable and unnotable—those who epitomize the love of Christ toward others but in an unsung, underappreciated, and unassuming manner.

I look around me and see a number of unnotable saints—those who provide thoughtful and kind service, not because they're obligated to or because they're paid to do it, but voluntarily out of a heart of compassion and thoughtfulness to others. I see saints cleaning up the messes others have made; I notice some feeding homeless people or reaching out to others in need because their consciences and compassion leads them to do so. I watch them drive people to medical appointments; I watch them stand out in public squares all by themselves making a witness for peace. I hear about them checking up on others who are isolated or going through a tough time.

There are saints providing medical care on the front lines of Ebola; there are saints teaching underprivileged children in economically depressed areas of Latin America to play instruments and enjoy music; there are saints sitting by the bedside of hospice patients; there are saints putting their lives on the line each day to

provide protection for those exposed to cruelty and violence. There are saints everywhere—imperfect people living out the grace of God as humble servants to others.

I could go on, but you get the idea. The saints who lead us to be more like Christ are not the necessarily the ones who command reverence for their position or place or legacy in life, nor are they likely to be those who make a public show of their faith. Most saints won't be canonized by anyone. Instead, they are the ones who most reflect the selfless spirit and character of this One who poured out his life for others. They may be unnotable for achieving great things in society, but what they do is pretty magnificent by the standards of heaven.

The cover to today's bulletin displays a part of the famous fresco painted in the rotunda of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Over a hundred characters from history are painted there—all dancing together as a company of saints. Many of them would not make the list of those canonized by the Catholic Church. Some were notably flawed as individuals. But all of them were known for an act of justice or mercy or remarkable service, warranting a study of their lives in order to find out more about them as persons. ("Busted Halo" might consider some of them to add to their collection!)

Many are unnotable or at least unknown, such as Roland Allen, an Episcopal missionary in East Africa, who in the early 20th century was a controversial critic and transformer of the colonial system of Christian missions. Another is an unnamed Alexandrian washerwoman, representative of all who in the 4th and 5th centuries

provided domestic help for the desert fathers and mothers who founded monasticism. Another is Donaldina Cameron, a Scottish Presbyterian social worker in San Francisco who, in the first half of the 20th century until her death in 1968, “defied Chinese gangs and crime lords, corrupt police, and complacent politicians to rescue girls kidnapped from China for sale as prostitutes and slaves.”

The mural also includes Anne Frank, Anne Hutchinson, Malcolm X, and John Coltrane, the African-American jazz player, whose faith in God led him and others out of their addiction to heroin. It even includes Lady Godiva, who rode naked on horseback through the streets of Coventry 1000 years ago to protest the new taxes that her own husband had imposed upon the poor, stripping them of everything, even the clothes off their back. (I bet that’s part of the story you never heard!)

To be a saint is to be in the world but not of the world, meaning we refuse to accept the standards of our culture for valuing people or conventional wisdom for how we are to live and who we are to serve. It means taking on the mantle of humility and service, often in unappreciated ways. It’s not viewing faith as another way to advance one’s life, but a means to sustain one’s life in bearing the sufferings of others. It is engaging oneself in the painful realities of life and offering empathy and grace to those who need it most. These are the true saints of our lives!

As Jesus said, “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” That is the path set before followers of

the One who poured out his life. May we follow it as well in embracing the calling we have as spiritual saints.

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