

***Shiloh United Methodist Church***  
Footnote Saints

Luke 8:1-3

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November 3, 2019

Luke 8:1-3 The Message (MSG)

**8** <sup>1-3</sup>He continued according to plan, traveled to town after town, village after village, preaching God’s kingdom, spreading the Message. The Twelve were with him. There were also some women in their company who had been healed of various evil afflictions and illnesses: Mary, the one called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out; Joanna, wife of Chuza, Herod’s manager; and Susanna—along with many others who used their considerable means to provide for the company.

Today, we celebrate the Christian holiday of All Saints Day. Every year, on the first Sunday of November, all Christians are invited to celebrate saints. Now for those who are not Catholic Christian feast like these are optional. For Catholics, FYI, it is a command performance. For all of us it is an invitation to celebrate and reflect on sainthood.

This leaves many people wondering what exactly is a saint?

Here is what the Rev. Marianne Niesen, a catholic nun turned Methodist minister has to say about saints.<sup>1</sup>

“For the early Christians, saints referred to all believers, anyone who followed Jesus. Pretty simple. But things never stay simple and, eventually, I’m sure, questions arose about who was following Jesus the right way. Who was doing Christianly best. Eventually, for Catholics, *saint*, became a term used to refer primarily to dead people who had led exemplary Christian lives. A process was developed to determine just when a good life crossed over into the *exemplary* category and so into

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<sup>1</sup> I borrowed(stole) most of the structure of this message from Rev. Marianne Niesen, my longtime mentor and saint in the tradition of our faith. Who taught me to be strong in the face of adversity and that life is full of turns you least expect. She preached her similar sermon on November 3, 1996 at St. Paul’s UMC in Helena, MT.

sainthood. Protestants, that's us, have tended to look suspiciously at the long saint process – and decided somewhere along the line to make the whole process simple by honoring as saints the people whose exemplary lives are mentioned in the Bible. Thus, *Saint*, Paul or *Saint*, Peter. But even Protestants have been more selective than we like to admit. Church powers have shied away from affirming Biblical women as saints. I don't think I have ever hear of a *Saint Susanna or Saint Mary* United Methodist Church – have you? So who are the saints? Are they really good dead people whose lives have stood the scrutiny of a saint committee? Are they really good but selectively chosen Biblical figures? Obviously, it depends on who you ask. That's what makes it so interesting, in spite of our lack of clarity on the whole subject, we have an *All Saints Day*.”

Which brings me to the scripture for today:

This short passage is one of those “and then” passages of scripture. A transition between one story of hope and teaching to another. What I love about the gospels is this is not a wasted space. Instead of just saying they continued on according to plan, there is a reminder here that the best plans are supported by those who pick up where details get left out.

Susanna, Mary, Joanna are these three women who as one article I found put it, “bankrolled Jesus’ ministry.” These women are almost a footnote in the text of Jesus’ ministry, and yet the gospel writer names them outright. He names them because of their generosity. Over the next several weeks we are going to spend time learning about these women. Today, I want to focus on Susanna. This unknown saint, who is mentioned nowhere else in scripture. Which leaves us to imagine who she was.

Last Sunday, I spent some time with some of the teenagers from our youth groups here in Billings. We spent some time talking about the saints in our lives. Something striking to me about the saints they

mentioned is that many were still alive. They could see these people who were making a difference in their lives right now. As many of you know I lost my mother earlier this year, at her memorial service I shared that for me her gift was making every mundane holiday over-special. Too many cookies at Christmas, so we had to take them to neighbors to share. Gifts for everyone on Halloween and Valentines day, a day when gifts were not necessary. To me her over exaggeration of holidays will always remind me that every day, even the mundane days are worth celebrating.

The story I didn't share was that on my way to see my mom for the last time I remember something distinctly that happened to me. The drive was rather melancholy, which I have to say is always hard in Montana. It was a beautiful day to drive across the state, Mountains still glistened with snow and the sun was shining. I was cruising down I-90 and making good time when suddenly some guy by passed me and shared a hand gesture that was not appropriate. I may have been going to slow in the passing lane at some point, or perhaps just something that annoyed this gentleman. However, what I distinctly remember understanding, was something I knew before.

One person's mundane day, a day which annoyances seem worth being aggressive about, can be the same day that their saint might be preparing to go to heaven. As another author put it, as she walked into the room of one of her saints for the final time. She could not fathom that as they packed up her grandmother's things, that in a few days the walls would be painted, floors cleaned, and a new person would move into the room of her saint. We want the flags to stay at half-mast for our saints, we want the remembrance to continue, but life continues even after death and in that reality there may be found some of the best news.

We want our saints, the people who have mattered in our life to have mattered. Sometimes as the world moves on it seems like they matter less. Here is the thing, they matter because we choose to remember them.

On Easter I shared the story of young boy who saw stained glass window with saints and said, “Saints, I get it, they are people the sun shines through.”

So, I would propose to you the saints we seek to honor on this day are perhaps, like Susanna in our text, are footnote saints. In other words people who others will look back on and say, “My life would not have gone the way it did without them.” Footnote saints are the ones who through their generosity help us believe in ourselves and our God. Without Susanna helping to support Jesus’ ministry we may never have heard of a rag tag group of disciples sharing God’s love. Susanna shows that the footnote saints matter, even enough for a gospel writer to include them.

In the book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving begins like this, “I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice – not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew...but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.”<sup>2</sup> That phrase is the heart of our story as well. All of us believe in God because of someone. Christ haunts us in the face of someone. We see God in the walk, word, deed or dare of someone. We believe in God, or we keep believing in God, or decide to give God another chance – because of someone. I doubt that Jesus ever envisioned statues or stained glass windows and processes for naming saints but I’m sure he knew that no one could make it through life with integrity and faith without the inspiration of footnote saints in human form. Without people whom we say *blessed are they!* Of course we need to pray and go directly to God and know God as companion and friend. We need a personal relationship with God. But we also need, every so often, to see a life of faith lived in the flesh. Made real. Saint don’t replace our need for a personal relationship with the Divine – they just help keep our vision clear so we can see how we’ve been blessed.

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<sup>2</sup> Irving, John, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, WM.Morrow & Co., New York: 1989., p. 13.

And when we're going through dark times, saints let the sun shine through – often quite colorfully!

From Christian history I find myself inspired by people like St. Clare of Assisi who believed in what God was asking of her and her sisters. When the human authority in her life, the Pope, refused to allow her to live absolute poverty as her friend Francis did, she took the Pope on – just as Francis had – and, just before her death, won. Or people like Susanna Wesley, John Wesley's mother, who had a husband who did not treat her well. However, she knew that she would pass love on to another generation of young people so she taught her children, and offered her son John, spiritual direction in his life. Or even people in the churches I have served who have taught me to pray deeply, to trust God is not done with us yet, and that we are called to transform the world in Christ's image.

None of these saints were perfect, but their footnote to history will remind us always that God is worth listening to, that a lesson is worth teaching, and that the lives we change will make Christ's love possible for the next generation.

Who are your saints? Today is the day to remember and be grateful. To tell each other stories of people who have touched your life. To name the blessed ones of your life. Living and dead. Those you've met. Those about whom you've heard tell. Those who, for you, the sun has shone through. Maya Angelou wrote a poem about such things. She refers especially to the deceased saints of our lives but her words speak to all of those who lives empower or bless us:

### When Great Trees Fall by Maya Angelou

When great trees fall,  
rocks on distant hills shudder,  
lions hunker down  
in tall grasses,  
and even elephants  
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall  
in forests,  
small things recoil into silence,  
their senses  
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,  
the air around us becomes  
light, rare, sterile.  
We breathe, briefly.  
Our eyes, briefly,  
see with  
a hurtful clarity.  
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,  
examines,  
gnaws on kind words  
unsaid,  
promised walks  
never taken.

Great souls die and  
our reality, bound to  
them, takes leave of us.  
Our souls,  
dependent upon their  
nurture,  
now shrink, wizened.  
Our minds, formed  
and informed by their  
radiance, fall away.  
We are not so much maddened  
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of  
dark, cold  
caves.

And when great souls die,  
after a period peace blooms,  
slowly and always  
irregularly. Spaces fill  
with a kind of  
soothing electric vibration.  
Our senses, restored, never

to be the same, whisper to us.  
They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.

— Maya Angelou

And that is the whole point of saints. *We can be and be better.* The stories of saints, the memories of those who have blessed us are God's way of empowering us, and prodding us onto our own path of sainthood. That's what it's all about. The early Christians had it right. We are all meant to be saints. To live our lives as a blessing. To help other find their way. And the saints of history and the saints of our lives have given us a great gift. They've shown us blessedness is possibility. In many ways and in many places. Not it is our turn.

So who are your saints? And when all the saints go marching in, what will be the generous blessing they'll say you gave?

Robert Teagarden and Margaret Forsyth and Dee Pedersen