

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on May 9, 2021.

ANONYMOUS SAINTS

And a woman in the city, who was a sinner having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Luke 7:37-38

During this program year we have focused on a theme we titled "Luminaries: Lives that Inspire." We have looked at individual Christians through history who can teach and inspire us to be more faithful. Many of them have been famous men or women who shaped historical events or gave new insights to faith.

There are times when the focus on saints can be off-putting to us. They can seem to be so special, they accomplished so much, they were so faithful that it doesn't quite connect to our everyday lives. We can seem small compared to them.

So today, I want to lift up all the "Anonymous Saints" that are all around us. In our Gospel lesson for today, we heard the story of a woman who came to Jesus and did a beautiful thing. She anointed his feet. She showed Jesus a great honor. It was an act of love to which Jesus responded with words of forgiveness.

What is interesting in this story is that we never learn her name. She is one of the anonymous people who showed love for Jesus. On the cover of our bulletin there is an empty frame. This represents all the nameless, faceless men and women who served Christ in the past and present. These anonymous saints demonstrated countless small acts of love. These acts of mercy were accomplished by men and women whose names are forgotten over the years. These small acts of faithfulness have been significant in countless lives.

Mother's Day is one of the high cultural holy days. I believe one purpose of this day is to remind us of how important these small acts of faithfulness are to those who receive them. I would like to share two stories that I may have told you before that remind us of the important acts of love and duty. Acts that we sometimes take for granted.

I am sure many of you have seen the actor Ben Stein, even if you do not recognize his name. Ben Stein played the boring Science teacher on the Wonder Years. He has done many commercials and had his own game show. Stein is not primarily an actor. He is a trained economist and lawyer and writer. His father was Herb Stein who served during the 1970's as Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors.

Following the death of his mother, Ben published an article, which consisted primarily of entries from his diary the week that his mother died and was buried. In this article we find

these reflections:

Of all the days to be buried. It's a perfect spring day, with blue skies and a gentle breeze carrying the exactly right amount of moisture.

On the way back to town, I started to calculate how many times my mother made breakfast for me: maybe 6,000 times, maybe more. She had an idea of what you were supposed to have for breakfast – three strips of bacon, one egg, beaten up in a chocolate milk shake, and toast. That was so we were well fed when we got to school. How many tuna fish sandwiches did she make for Parkside Elementary School until they put a cafeteria in, before my fourth grade in 1954. I think maybe she made me about 700 of them. Always on Arnold bread with just a hint of mayonnaise. Always with an apple in a Captain Video lunch box.

How many times did she pick me up in the rain? How many times did she make my bed? How many times did she shop for my clothes? How many times did she iron my shirts?

Then when I was in college, all alone, all of those letters. How many? How many times did she write to me? Every day, from Japan or London or California or wherever she was. Sometimes twice a day. How many letters and postcards? Maybe a thousand. And then in law school, maybe another few hundred.

For this, she got in return – for most of my life – a child who thought he was God's gift to the world and considered all that his parents did for him to be his lawful due – and a lot less than that. I can recall holding my breath in about 1951 when my parents refused to buy me a Chris Craft cabin cruiser – a real one, not a toy – which I also thought was mine by divine right.

That is the way it is with kids and their moms. The moms work like madwomen, and the kids just slurp it up and think it's owed to them and never think to be grateful.

I have one argument with Ben. He says this is the way it is with kids and their moms. He is projecting his mother onto all mothers. We know that there are many mothers and fathers who do not fulfill their duty. We know of children who are abused, neglected and abandoned. Every parent does not step up to the plate and do what they are called to do.

Parenting is hard. Good parenting means many small sacrifices. It means patience and tolerance that comes from love granted by a higher power. Each small act not seemingly significant but taken together are a great pattern of love. Today we are thankful for all those “Anonymous Saints” who did their duty for their children.

A parental love that is life giving allows children and grandchildren to become their own person. Love gives them the freedom to find their own way, to have their own feelings, beliefs and goals. I have shared with some of you a wonderful story that Ernest Boyer tells of his grandfather. His grandfather was a lay preacher who loved God with all his heart. He also loved all people with a love that respected who they were. Boyer went through a time when he no longer believed in God. He shares how his grandfather dealt with him during his agnostic phase in these words:

Grandfather was in his late nineties when I left for college. He still preached several times a week – preaching his last sermon on his ninety ninth birthday – but I avoided these. And I had come to dread the prayer that inevitably marked our parting. My life was, I felt, worlds away from his. I felt nothing but embarrassment when I knelt beside my chair as he, kneeling beside his, prayed his long, emotional prayers.

One afternoon in late November I took time off from college to visit him. He was living with his daughter then. It was she who met me at the door.

"He's not been well," she said in response to my question. "He has an infection in his leg. It's not bad, but his circulation is now so poor that it doesn't heal. He grows weaker every day..."

She took me to his bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed fully dressed. He smiled when I came in and waved, but did not get up as he had always done in the past. I pulled a chair near to him.

"My, my," he said, looking me over slowly. For a moment I expected him to continue, as he always had when I was a child, "Just look at this boy. How big he is getting!" Instead, he smiled slyly, as if aware of what I expected, and kept silent.

A Bible was open on his lap, an unpleasant reminder of the prayer that would inevitably be the final ordeal of our meeting. He marked his place, closed the book, and laid it beside him, then began to question me about my life. I answered as vaguely as possible. The world in which I lived seemed too far removed from his. I was sure he would never understand it. Then too, at that moment, I felt suddenly uneasy that he might somehow discover that I had fully rejected the faith in God upon which his life had been built. And because I felt uncomfortable with what I was saying, I talked all the longer, trying to make my words sound plausible to him and to myself.

He listened in silence, his eyes half closed, his head turned to one side. Several time he nodded slowly.

When I finished, he was silent a moment; then he reached under his

pillow and took out a harmonica. He asked me if I had any favorite songs. Caught off guard – this particular talent of his had been entirely unknown to me – I could not think of a single title that he would have had any chance of knowing, so he struck up some of his own favorites. None of the tunes I recognized, but as he finished each one he paused to tell me its name – old love songs, every one.

He played until he was out of breath, at least twenty minutes. By then his daughter had opened the door and mentioned to me that it was time for a nap. I stood and told him I had to go.

This time he pulled himself to his feet and braced himself on the headboard of the bed. Grimly I awaited what would follow. Once he lowered himself into a kneeling position, I would have to kneel too, and in that humiliating posture endure the long prayer I had been dreading.

But he did not kneel. Instead he took my hand in both of his, shook it, then drew me closer and kissed me on the cheek.

It was several moments before he let my hand drop. When at last he did, I said good-bye and went to the door, but just before I opened it he called to me.

"When you pray," he said, "if you pray, remember me." I nodded. He smiled, in my last glimpse of him before closing the door he was sitting on the bed once more, waving.

Those were his last words to me. I had underestimated the depth of his love, the fullness of his ability to recognize and to accept in me even my rejection of the faith he knew to be the center of life.

This old man knew the secret of our God's love. Because of his love for his grandson he put relationship first and in a wonderfully indirect way demonstrated that love and healed a strained relationship.

The present Pope Francis tells us:

There are the saints of every day, the 'hidden' saints, a sort of 'middle class of holiness'... to which we can all belong.

Friends it is within our families that the Gospel is first to be made real in our lives. On this Mother's Day we may recommit ourselves to loving our families with the love first shown us by Christ. May we be, like the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, one of the anonymous saints that makes love real in everyday life.