

Everyday Love, Everyday Saints

a sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

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We celebrate the saints today. The saints are symbols of faithful living. We often focus on the big saints - people that are known all over the world. St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr. This past year we lost another big saint – one called an American Prophet – William Sloane Coffin. We celebrate the big saints and we need their stories to give us courage and hope.

But we need the everyday saints too. Riverside Church sits across the street from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. There was once a great preacher at Riverside – Harry Emerson Fosdick. And the students in the seminary all wanted to be a great preacher like Fosdick. But most of them did not have his same abilities. And the students would get discouraged. Here was their big saint, and they fell so far short of being like him. Noticing this, a professor at the seminary addressed the students one day and said: “Don’t let that incredibly brilliant man destroy your ministry. We can’t all be Fosdicks. You give what you have to give.”

Dale Turner tells the story of a young man who went to the great English evangelist of the late 19th and early 20th century, Gipsy Smith, and asked for help getting a job. Gipsy Smith asked him- can you preach. The reply was - well, I guess I wouldn’t set the river on fire.” Gipsy Smith responded – No, I suppose not. But if I threw you in, could you make it fizz? (In his book *Different Seasons*, p. 197)

Some saints will set the world on fire. And some saints can make a small part of the world fizz. We do what we can do. We live the lives we have been given. And sometimes it is the fizz of the everyday people that inspires us the most. We need to hear their stories. We need their example.

There are two stories that have caught my attention the past couple of weeks. Both of them from the world of sports. One was tucked down at the bottom of page 2 in the Sports section of the Asheville Citizen Times, and it was a story that I easily could have rushed over and never read. But I had time on this day, and was reading at a more leisurely pace. It was a story of a NFL place kicker named Matt Bryant. He kicked a 62 yard field goal, which is one of the longest in National Football League history. The mayor of Tampa made a big deal of this because Matt Bryant played for the Tampa Bay team. So the mayor pronounced a special proclamation for this great achievement. But Matt Bryant responded in a way that I find refreshing. He said: “It was a great accomplishment. It’s not an everyday thing. But everyday stuff is what I want to be remembered for.”

There was also the story of the soccer coach for Reynolds High School. Reynolds and Asheville High were playing in an important end of the year game. The score was 1-0 in favor of Reynolds, when Reynolds apparently made a 2nd goal. But the Asheville coach saw it differently and appropriately challenged the call – saying the ball never went into the net. The Reynolds coach had no reason to doubt

the call, but decided to ask some of his players about it. They told him that in fact the ball had not gone into the net, that in fact it had not been a goal. And so, the coach walked over to the referee and the Asheville High coach and said – I just learned from my players that there was no goal. The Asheville coach is right. The score is still 1-0.

He didn't have to do this. Most likely the referee would not have changed the call. The extra goal would most likely assure his team a victory. And in fact, Asheville did score a goal in the final minutes and the game ended up a tie. But this coach chose to do what we learn to do in everyday life – to tell the truth, to do what is right. Winning was not what was most important, but instead being honorable and modeling for his team what it means to be a good athlete. And a good person.

I would imagine that most of us who have played sports do not remember many specific games. We forget the scores. We even forget many of our prized accomplishments. But I bet those youth on both teams – and indeed a whole community – will remember for a long time the simple act of honesty by this coach. He will probably never become a world renowned saint – but we will remember him, and we will be encouraged to tell the truth and do what is right next time when we have to make such a choice because of his example.

A scribe comes up to Jesus and asks: What is the greatest commandment? And Jesus says – it is to love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength - and to love others. That is what Jesus named as being most important. Not a commandment on morality or what food to eat. It is about attitude and behavior. Love God. Love others. And in other places in the gospel, Jesus spells that out even more. Love your enemies. Love those who seek to hurt you or destroy you. Love those who curse you. Love God, love others. It comes from the heart of Jewish teaching found in Deuteronomy 6. Love God, love others. It was part of the everyday life of the people.

To love God does not require us to do anything specifically. But if we love God, it will change how we do everything particularly. And the question we have to ask is – how does our loving God change who we are? How does it change the way we love our neighbor? How does it change the way we see the world? How does it change the way we relate with Earth? How does it change the way we vote?

I have been struck by the way an Amish community in Pennsylvania responded to the terrible situation they encountered in which a man came into their school, held the children hostage, hurt some of them, then killed others of them. How awful can it get? They had every right and reason to be outraged and to want to hurt this man the way he had hurt their children. Put yourself in their shoes. Some of you know of such horror in your own life. You know what it feels like when a family member is killed or permanently injured. We in the community, whether it is our family member or not, we know what this outrage is about. It is appropriate and human to be so angry at the one who inflicts so much hurt.

So how did this Amish community respond so quickly with forgiveness and grace? Did they deny their anger? Did they offer an empty forgiveness just because they read in the Bible that we are to love those who hurt us? To love those who become our enemy? I don't know what the inner thoughts of this community were or are. I imagine that they will hurt for a very long time to come. But what they chose to do was to act in a loving way towards the family of the man who killed their children and then killed himself. At that man's funeral, half of the congregation were from the Amish community. They have started a conversation between the families of the children who were killed and the family of the man who did the killing. And they have set up a fund for that man's family.

I am sure they did not feel like doing these things. But love is not a feeling. It is a commitment. It is a promise to live in a way that does not increase the hurt or the violence. It is to do what is right – and to do it even when we don't feel like doing it.

Loving God and loving others.

We live in a season when there is a lot of talk about September 11, 2001. That event is still part of the politics of this current election. The war that we started in Afghanistan and Iraq was our reaction to feeling so hurt and angry. On Sept. 11, in the words of Yvette Flunders, pastor of City of Refuge UCC in San Francisco, "evil attacked us, and evil is our common enemy." The issue is not who embodied that evil so much as it is that evil was the force that broke loose and attacked. Evil is that which breaks us apart and destroys all sense of hope and love. Evil came at us and dealt us a mighty blow. And we have given evil more and more power by attacking back. Evil has separated us. Love can bring us together. We have spent billions and billions of dollars trying to chase down and kill the evil. We have destroyed countless lives, separated families and faith communities and villages of people. We have killed children and people who long for nothing more than to live their everyday lives again. We have inflicted terrible violence on the others we have been called by Jesus to love. And we have not eradicated evil in the least. (from Yvette's book *Where the Edge Gathers*, and especially p. 123).

We know in our everyday lives that getting even, making others hurt the way we have been hurt – that it never brings us peace. But we also know that when we love each other through the pain, when we do all we can to heal the hurt, when we struggle to find a way to forgive each other, that we are able to at least step towards a new reality. We must try to do the right thing to restore the community to a loving place. That is what we are called to practice in churches. That is what the saints learn to do – mostly in the everyday living of life. Loving God, loving others. Not hurting others back.

When we fight evil with all our military power, when we put so much of our financial resources into the machinery of destruction and violence, then we are denying individuals and communities across the world those very resources of creativity and energy. To build schools. To educate teachers. To provide health care. To build parks. To provide homes. To help people in their everyday hurts to find healing and hope. To celebrate all the gifts of community that we so long to have the time and energy to embrace.

Loving God, loving others.

I urge all of us to think about what difference it makes to us to be called to love God and others. How does it change us? How are we willing to let it change us? Can we make it our discipline every day to remember – Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. And to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is, to love others. Can we start each day saying this to ourselves. Today I will do all I can to love God and to let that love teach me how to better love others. I will do nothing without first of all asking myself – how can I bring love to this moment? What is the loving way to respond? I wonder what difference this will make for us?

And I wonder this too - can we vote on Tuesday for those who will help us bring forth a commitment of love as a higher value than getting even? Can we vote for those who seek to broaden our understandings and our laws of what it means to be family and community and nation? Can we vote with the love of God for us and all people without adding to the discrimination that already exists in our institutions and our attitudes? Can we take love of God and others to the polls and begin to help create a world that lives that love – the way we seek to live it in our everyday lives, in our everyday relationships.

And when we talk about the budget in just a bit today – can we ask – what resources do we need so that this church can be a symbol of faithful living to this community? And so that we have the resources we need to teach love, and to practice love so that it will infuse all our other work as the church.

And then, as you begin to think about what your pledge will be to the church in 2 weeks, will you pray about that in the spirit of this commandment on love – how can my giving of my money be in the spirit of increasing the love I have for God and that God will help me have for others. Can we value that commandment for our lives so much that we are willing to invest more of what we have and more of who we are into helping to increase our capacity to love.

The saints are those who seek to love God and others. All the time. In every situation. To the best of their ability. It is their prayer. It can be ours too. And together we in the church can become, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “what the world is meant to be.” So may it be. Amen.