

Sermons from Park Hill: November 2, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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All Saints Day - November 2, 2008

Matthew 5: 1-12
“Qualifications for Sainthood”

If you were on Craigslist looking for a job, you might see one that excites you. “Oh, I’d love to do that.” You might see another where you could say, “I think my skills could apply.” There’s a few where you could say, “I think I could get *them* to think I have the right skills.” And then tons of listings where you don’t have the education, skills, or maybe even temperament to be hired... Would you still apply? What if one of the listings was for a saint? Would you just jump over that one? Aren’t you qualified to be a saint?

What are the qualifications for a saint? Virtue? Strong moral character? You might think that one of the requirements is to be dead. But not

all saints are dead. And not all saints have a strong moral character. And virtue? We can turn sainthood into something like chivalry. It’s proper to open the door for the next person or pull out the chair for a date – something quaint and inoffensive. “Saintly.” But some saints are rude, crude, and annoying beyond description. And to equate saints with those who are good and righteous misses the point.

What about a strong moral character? Isn’t it character that defines a saint? But, some are more characters than people of good character. Because, what happens when good character becomes confused with being nice? Those who have challenged and changed the world don’t always accomplish things by getting along nicely in a group. In the book of Romans, Paul links character with suffering and endurance and hope and perseverance. Perhaps, I think, a kind of inspired stubbornness. But many great men and women of faith are deeply flawed, and they often know it. Yet it doesn’t paralyze; and may even make their striving that much more urgent. As Mother Teresa said, I rise and fall and rise and fall. She tried to do better. Others really don’t care what anyone else thinks.

So, you might be thinking to yourself, “well, I can be rude, and stubborn, and if I don’t have to be dead, I’ll take the job!!” Alas, the only disqualification is to want to be a saint.

So what are we doing talking about saints anyway? Protestants don’t have saints – or, at

Sermons from Park Hill: November 2, 2008

least, we don't have a process of beatification. About 10 years ago I discovered a book written by Robert Ellsberg called *All Saints* that changed my whole way of thinking on this subject. Rather than focus on the "official" saints and the multiple steps required before one is declared to be a saint – such as verifying miracles done in their name – Ellsberg names some surprising people, one for each day of the year, in his book *All Saints*.¹

So who are they? One that he includes is Fannie Lou Hamer, a poor African American woman who was inspired at a voters rights rally in 1962, so she joined to organize registration drives in the 60s and personally challenged the all-white leadership of the Democratic Party at its national convention, creating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Inspired by a vision of justice and freedom, she discovered deep within her this passion, sustained by her faith, she found the strength to confront her fears, stand up to dogs, fire hoses, and clubs. Absolutely determined.

She's in good company with others like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Along with Cesar Chavez, the farm-worker organizer. And Stephen Biko, the martyr for freedom in South Africa.

¹ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*, New York: Crossroad, 1997. All quotes that follow come from his book.

Ellsberg names non-Christians too. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who is perhaps most famous for his associations with Martin Luther King, he was the most prominent connection for the Jewish community with the civil rights movement. But he wasn't just an activist. Heschel's writings, described by Rabbi Morris as "stream of consciousness," focused on wonder and what he called "radical amazement." I love the idea of holding wonder for the cosmos and the rights of human beings together.

Others he named include Chief Seattle, Ghandi, Anne Frank and Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher who is famous for the concept of "I and Thou" in our relationship with God. These are all persons he believes have the qualities that Christians should aspire to emulate. In fact, one of Ellsberg's problems with the whole notion of traditional sainthood is that, first, they were disproportionately martyrs, and second, they are often seen as persons to venerate, not imitate. In fact, Dorothy Day, who is not "officially" a saint, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement, once famously said, "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so quickly."

We might have no difficulty recognizing persons from the civil rights movement as saints because many of them are already our heroes (we also know they weren't perfect models of behavior). We also might easily recognize those like Oscar Romero and Dom Helder Camara who worked with the poor in Central and South America against brutal, repressive governments that exploited the poor in the 1980s. These

Sermons from Park Hill: November 2, 2008

governments often tried to kill anyone, and almost as often succeeded, including killing priests and nuns who would stand up for justice. Oscar Romero, who initially thought the church should stay out of politics, became thoroughly converted to the cause of the poor and oppressed, and was assassinated while saying Mass. I think our congregation can easily identify these kinds of folks as saints – and add a few more, like gay rights activist Harvey Milk and feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. The UCC has almost turned Antoinette Brown into our own saint, as the first woman ordained in the United States 150 years ago by a Congregational church.

But this week I came across a listing I hadn't paid attention to before. Surprisingly, one of the saints he lists is an economist named E.F. Schumacher who lived from 1911 to 1977. Given the current state of our economy, I thought perhaps he is someone we should know more about. Schumacher was an economist who spent a lifetime mastering the principles of growth and the "invisible hand" of the market, but writing from the perspective of the 1950s and 60s, he said, "In the excitement over the unfolding of scientific and technical powers, modern man has built a system of production that ravishes nature and a type of society that mutilates man."

He came to believe that "traditional economics, despite its scientific pretensions, traditional economics is really a kind of religion," with ultimate values, where the inherent worth of an

individual is their capacity toward growth, efficiency, and productivity, ignoring the spiritual dimensions of people and leading civilization, he predicted, toward catastrophe.

In an essay entitled "Buddhist Economics," which he named because, he laughed, though thoroughly influenced by Buddhist principles, no one would have read something called "Christian Economics." In it he describes an economy regulated by concern for permanence, equality, the reduction of desires, the alleviation of suffering, respect for beauty, and the dignity of work. This is in contrast to an economic system he described in 1973 as sustained by waste, short-term gain, and the stimulation of greed and envy.

I am really intrigued by his descriptions. We don't build anything anymore with the idea that it would be permanent; we still don't give equal pay to men and women for equal work; our economy is built on consumer spending which depends on getting us to want more, to desire more things; we allow those without health insurance to suffer the consequences; we remove Appalachian mountaintops to gain easier access to the coal underneath; and we lay people off work like we're drunken soldiers, escorted to the door with a box and an armed guard. Where's dignity - And beauty? Where's the alleviation of suffering and the consequences of greed? Where's equality? And where's permanence – things of lasting value? Has anybody heard of this saint before? Maybe now it's time, ridiculed as he was during his own.

Sermons from Park Hill: November 2, 2008

Without a system of rules for sainthood, we are therefore free to define what makes a saint. Ellsberg also includes in his list composers Mozart, Bach and artists Vincent Van Gogh and Kathe Kollwitz. Have you heard of her? I've seen her haunting paintings in the National Gallery in Washington. Her "depictions of hunger, unemployment, domestic violence, and the oppressive burden of despair are among the most poignant images in all of 20th century art." Her works at the time were banned by the Nazis but she continued to paint, driven by her sense of personal responsibility, urgency. She wrote, "Culture arises only when the individual fulfills his or her cycle of obligations. If everyone recognizes and fulfills their obligations, genuineness emerges. A nation can be built on nothing less."

What is at the heart of all saints? It doesn't matter what one's virtue or moral character or status as a *living* human might be. They are people who are blessed, though some call them cursed, with a passion, perseverance, stubbornness, and annoying dedication to fulfilling what they know is their *purpose* in life, their *obligation* to humankind, their *calling* from God. Not superhuman – that would dismiss them too quickly – but totally committed to their cause or their faith. It is faithfulness tested beyond where many others would keep going. They will just not give up. Everyone has it – something, somewhere, sometimes buried deep.

But, fellow saints, as Paul calls the members of Christ's church, fellow saints "there is a path to holiness that lies within each of us and our individual circumstances, that engages our talents and temperaments, that contends with our own strengths and weaknesses, that responds to the needs of our neighbors and our own particular moment in history. The feast of All Saints Day strengthens and encourages us." To go deeper.

If you are seeking fulfillment in your life, I don't think it comes by accident. Fulfillment is engaging regardless of the cost, the inconvenience, the lack of support from others who may think you're crazy. Your purpose, your obligation to humankind, your calling from God. But remember, we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses who are here to cheer you on. They understand, even if you don't completely understand it yourself. And that may just be the qualification for sainthood that you need.