

Ordinary Saints

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“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”¹

A number of years ago I gave a New Years Day sermon at a church in which I told the congregation assembled that I was giving up New Year’s resolutions that were too difficult for me to keep and instead had settled on one I was sure I could follow through on. That resolution was simply, to change the world. The seeming immodesty of my resolution generated laughter among those in attendance.

Laughter of course is sometimes a great ice breaker, it can be a sign of comfort or ease among a group of people. But laughter can also mask or disguise our unease. To be honest, I’m more often met with laughter than serious commitment from people when I talk about changing the world. It’s not difficult to see why.

Every day we are bombarded with news of war, hatred, disease, greed, political dysfunction, and violence... stories highlighting our inhumanity towards one another... stories of injustice and suffering that weigh heavily on our hearts and minds.

And as our spirits are worn thin by the sheer magnitude of the world’s problems, we find ourselves doubly pained by the pang of our apparent powerlessness and discomfoting inertia. Changing the world can seem an impossible task. We hunger for inspiration to break the bonds of despair and inaction.

“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”

On November 1st many churches celebrate(d) All Saints Day, a day to remember and honor all saints known and unknown. While the definition of who or what a saint is varies widely among the world’s religions, we can say with some confidence that saints, regardless of the religious tradition with which they are identified, are called to act in service of something larger than themselves; they are called to shine the light of the Holy into the shadowy places of our world. Contrary to our cultural assumption, saints are not flawless individuals, even the saints immortalized in stone and stained glass, legend and lore, were imperfect.

¹ Robert R. Walsh, “It Matters” from Noisy Stones. (Boston: UUA, 1992)

The esteemed psychologist Abraham Maslow reminds us, “There are no perfect human beings! Persons can be found who are good, very good indeed, in fact, great. There do in fact exist creators, seers, sages, saints, shakers, and movers...even if they are uncommon and do not come by the dozen. And yet these very same people can at times be boring, irritating, petulant, selfish, angry, or depressed. To avoid disillusionment with human nature, we must first give up our illusions about it.”² Saints then, are ordinary people who happen to be extraordinarily human.

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The ordinary saints among us are living embodiments of these words. They are profoundly human people who remind us that we are co-authors in life whose choices determine the outcome of our stories... and ultimately the meaning of our lives. The ordinary saint possesses a deep and abiding awareness of the interconnectedness of all life and acts accordingly.

One of the pitfalls well meaning people fall into in the face of the world’s suffering is to focus on the magnitude of the problem. But doing so only increases our likelihood of becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of powerlessness and inertia. Instead we might learn the way of the ordinary saint. The ordinary saint learns to see with clarity, discerns what is truly possible in a given moment and then responds to that awareness because it matters; the ordinary saint refuses to condemn humankind to ugliness; he or she or they reveals to us the beauty we all possess, beauty which resides, according to R.C.A. Moore, “in our entire selves; our nerves and muscles, our histories and minor choices.”³

“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”

When I was in middle school there was a boy in my class who used to bully me mercilessly. One day Mr. LeBlanc, my gym teacher, witnessed this boy humiliating me in front of some other boys. Mr. LeBlanc reprimanded the bully then took me aside and asked if I was okay. He told me to let him know if the boy made any more trouble for me. Mr. LeBlanc was an ordinary saint. He saw suffering, figured out what he could do, and took action.

Today, Mr. LeBlanc is one of the few teachers from middle school whose name I still remember, and not because I loved gym. I remember his name because he chose to respond to my suffering when others stood as silent witnesses to it. He modeled compassion and affirmed that I was worth caring about when the inaction of others

² http://www.philosophersnotes.com/quotes/by_teacher/Abraham+Maslow

³ R.C.A. Moore “Words for the Wind” in Freethinking Mystics with Hands: Exploring the Heart of Unitarian Universalism Tom Owen–Towle (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998).

denied my dignity as person. He brought the light of the Holy into the dimness of my world at that time and for that I will always be grateful.

“Nothing is settled. Everything matters.”

Ordinary saints are people whose very way of being in the world changes the world. They are all around us giving us refuge from life’s troubles with a kind word or a smile. They are the people who don’t lose their temper with a new cashier and people who slow down so you can get out of a driveway on a busy street.

They are strangers who show up at candlelight vigils to stand with the suffering and the person who takes the time to write a letter to Congress. They are people like Itaru Sasaki, a garden designer from Japan, credited as being the creator of the wind phone, a disconnected phone that people can use to have one-way conversations with their loved ones who’ve died and that have become a source of solace for people around the world. Ordinary saints are people who suffer and celebrate knowing we co-author the story of our species and the world with how we live our lives. They are people... just ordinary people who choose a different path, people whose minor choices beautify the world moment by moment, breath by breath, life by life.

Writer Robert Benson reminds us, “All of the places of our lives are [potential] sanctuaries; some of them just happen to have steeples. And all of the people in our lives are [potential] saints; it is just that some of them have day jobs and most will never have feast days named for them.”⁴ Ordinary saints are just people; people who understand, “Nothing is settled. Everything Matters.”

It seems only right that we should set aside time to honor the ordinary saints in our lives. Those people who by their words and deeds have shaped the direction of our lives and have inspired us to plumb the depths of our humanity that we might live more fully and more kindly this precious life we’ve been given.

How might we honor our ordinary saints? The following excerpt from an anonymous poem I was given is a good place to begin...

“Remember me in your heart:

Your thoughts, and your memories,

Of the times we loved,

⁴ <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/003646.html> (Robert Benson is a writer and leads seminars and retreats on prayer, silence, writing, and spirituality.)

The times we cried,
The times we laughed,
For if you always think of me, I will never have gone.”⁵

“Nothing is settled. Everything Matters.”

“All of people in our lives are [potential] saints”, Robert Benson reminds us, and most of them ordinary. And friends, this means you too can be someone’s saint...the bearer of light in another person’s moment of hopelessness or the flame which brightens their day.

Now perhaps to some of you this may sound a bit sentimental... a little too saccharin for those of you who prefer your religion with a little more grit. Trust me, it is not my intention to fill your heart and minds with the theological equivalent of marshmallow fluff. Rather, I hope that you will take my words today as an invitation to pause and reflect, to become a little more aware and appreciative of those ordinary saints who have come bearing the light of Holy into your life and that in so reflecting you will grow in awareness of opportunities and courage to do the same for others. Our world needs ordinary saints. You and your children and your children’s children can change the world...we all can by learning the way of the ordinary saint.

The ordinary saint shows us how to be human. They change the world one person at a time through words and deeds that reveal to one another the love of that which some call God. The call of the ordinary saint is echoed in the rallying cry attributed to our Universalist forbear, John Murray who said, “Go out into the highways and by-ways ...Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of all people. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”⁶

Remember, “Nothing is settled, everything matters.”

The choice... is yours.

Amen and Blessed Be.

⁵ www.funeralhelper.org/remember-me-in-your-heart-unknown-remembrance.html

⁶ http://www.jsmsociety.com/John_Murray.html