***Accidental Saints***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on May 11, 2024*

*based on Acts 7: 55-60.*

The Book of Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. It’s hero is the apostle, Paul, but it plays pretty fast and loose with details of his life compared with Paul’s letters. Having been written long after Paul is dead, it comes across as swashbuckling historical fiction.

Like all New Testament works, it has its own agenda, its own view of the Jesus enterprise. According to Acts, the early Jesus enterprise is growing fast. 3,000 people are said to respond when Peter preaches. That’s a bit much from what we know from sociologists of the era.

In any case, Luke tells us that immediately there were growing pains. Well, it’s one thing to be a loose-knit band of disciples walking from hill town to hill town in Galilee. It’s another thing altogether to have to deal with 3,000 new converts in downtown Jerusalem with no building, no staff, no stewardship campaign, no parking.

Some weren’t getting fed, some were going hungry. There is a lot of complaining. The new church has to get organized.

That’s how a young man named Stephen emerges. He’s one of several selected to distribute food. This is the first Board of Deacons. The apostles, those who claim to have known Jesus, bless Stephen and the rest and they go to work, waiting on tables and, I imagine, raising funds.

That’s what gets Stephen in trouble. Not the money part, but the speaking up part. He tells the Jesus story, just like Peter did, but instead of 3,000 converts, Stephen gets arrested. In his self-defense he insults his accusers.

A crowd becomes a violent lynch mob and they take Stephen out to stone him to death, but not before he says something profound and familiar – “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Stephen’s career is brief but his legacy will be huge. Another young man who is there at his execution (not wielding a stone but standing over to one side making sure no one steals the overcoats of the ones throwing the stones) was an arch-conservative Pharisee by the name of Saul.

His plan was to stamp out the new Christian church. How ironic.

You never know who you are speaking to, you never know who is watching and being influenced by your example. Saul would never forget what he saw that day, that courageous, faithful young man, Stephen, dying for his convictions with nothing but love in his heart.

Saul would, shortly thereafter, have a major change of heart, a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. He would mark this change by taking a new name: Paul.

And he would become one of a small handful of people about whom one can say that the rest of Christian history is inconceivable, apart from their efforts. Yes, and he too would die violently.

What’s on my mind this morning is that Stephen, real or imagined, was the first in a long line of martyred saints in the Christian tradition. His gracefulness in dying for his faith set a powerful precedent, and every sacrifice in the name of Jesus since then, beginning with Paul’s, can be measured by his.

We Protestants know little of the list of great saints that many Catholic school children know by heart. Well, I think that we should know some of them. Like St. Maximillian, the first conscientious objector. He was drafted by the Roman army, but he refused to serve. His only loyalty, he said, was to the army of God. This made his father very upset, knowing that his son would be executed for following his conscience.

At his beheading, Maximillian noticed the shabby clothing of his executioner, and calling to his father in the crowd, asked that his own clothing, clothing of high quality, be taken off him and given to the man who would kill him; a very Stephen like gesture.

A similar story is told about a St. James the Greater who, legend says, so impressed one of his guards that on his way to his death, the guard fell on his knees confessing his faith. At which point James said, “Peace be with you,” and the man said in return, “and the peace of the Christ be with you, too.”

The same peace we exchange here every Sunday morning. It gains in meaning though, doesn’t it, when you realize what was at stake in context of the story of St. James.

Now, not all saints’ stories are violent. Some saints have been domesticated; made into plaster figures meant to decorate a backyard garden. I’m thinking of an image of St. Francis with a bird on his shoulder and a wolf by his side.

Though he was not martyred in a gladiatorial ring, Francis was a martyr nevertheless, dying quite young from years of over-work, self-sacrifice, chronic infections, and malnutrition at 44.

There’s more than one way to be a martyr, and you don’t even have to be particularly religious. I think of Senator Edmund Ross, the deciding vote in the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson way back in 1868.

Few Senators in the history of our republic have known the pressures he bore when it came time for a floor vote. Curiously, he didn’t much like President Andrew Johnson, successor to Abraham Lincoln. He didn’t respect the man, but he also didn’t believe that Johnson was guilty of an impeachable offense. He knew his colleagues just wanted to rid themselves of the president.

As Edmund Ross said later of the moment when his name was read and it was his turn to vote, “I felt I was looking down into my open grave.”

He followed his conscience, and as a result, lost his Senate seat, but he would not sell his soul.

It has become apparent in the last weeks that the esteemed West Point Military Academy, under pressure from the Department of Defense, has decided to sell its collective soul. How incredibly ironic for our premier war college to have no backbone at all when push comes to shove. Here’s how it came down.

Four days after he was sworn in as defense secretary, Pete Hegseth directed the military service academies to scrub their curriculum of ideologies President Trump had deemed “divisive,” “un-American.”

Hours later, department heads at West Point sent civilian and military professors emails asking for their course syllabuses.

Most professors said they assumed the school would defend its academic program. Instead, West Point’s leaders initiated a schoolwide push to remove any readings that focused on race, gender or the darker moments of American history.

A history professor who taught a course on genocide was instructed not to mention atrocities committed against Native Americans. The English department purged works by well-known authors, such as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, because of the color of their skin. Toni Morrison … who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Think about it.

Dr. Graham Parsons, a West Point professor of philosophy, resigned in protest. His department head and academic deans said nothing.

Dr. Parsons said, “I’ve lost faith that most people will do the right thing under pressure. That’s the really painful part of [this] … The United States Military Academy at West Point abandoned its core principles. I am ashamed to be associated with the academy in its current form.”

The test of courage came and West Point buckled. They have chosen to indoctrinate their cadets, not educate them, and the student body knows this.

Dr. Parsons is just one of many new martyrs in our nation today. Sadly, there are hundreds -- among them, a four-year-old girl deported to Honduras who was in cancer treatment.

A four-year-old receiving treatment for metastatic cancer was deported without medication or consultation with her treating physicians, despite ICE being notified in advance of the child's critical medical condition. In our country. Right now. This is happening.

Back to our topic. When you look closely into the lives of historical Christian martyrs, one of the first things you notice about them is that they weren’t really all that “saint” like. St. Bernard, for instance, for whom the breed of dog is named, organized the Second Crusade.

Frederick Bueckner writes, “In God’s holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.”

Which tells us that saint making is God’s doing, not our own. God makes of ordinary people, fallible people like ourselves, extraordinary examples to fulfill God’s purposes in the world.

This shouldn’t entirely surprise us, given the company we know Jesus kept.

Here’s something the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber has said on this subject:

“I've never fully understood how Christianity became quite so tame and respectable, given its origins among drunkards, prostitutes, and tax collectors. Jesus could have hung out in the high-end religious scene of his day, but instead, he scoffed at all that, choosing instead to laugh at the powerful, befriend prostitutes, kiss sinners, and eat with all the wrong people.

He spent his time with people for whom life was not easy. And there, amid those who were suffering, he was the embodiment of perfect love . . . It has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God’s ability to work through the likes of us.

The title “saint” is always conferred, never earned … I have come to realize that all the saints I’ve known have been accidental ones – people who inadvertently stumble into redemption like they were looking for something else at the time, people who have just a wee bit of a drinking problem and manage to get sober and help others do the same.

People who are as kind as they are hostile. (Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*).

I think of a woman, not sainted by any church, whose behavior was anything but saint-like, but who was remarkable by any estimation. I’m thinking of a black woman who took the name, “Sojourner Truth.” Let me add that there is no more appropriate saint to celebrate on Mother’s Day, though I’m sure West Point has expunged any record of her from their libraries and curriculum.

Here's the story of an appearance she made at the 1851 *Convention on Women's Rights* in Akron, Ohio. In response to a clergyman's remarks ridiculing women as too “weak and helpless to entrust with the right to vote,” she had this to say. Someone took down every word she said:

*Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon.*

*That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and they need to have the best place everywhere. Well, nobody ever helps* ***me*** *into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?*

*Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as any man (when I could get it) and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?*

*I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all of them sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?*

*Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.*

*If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it; well, the men better let them. (1851)*

Sojourner Truth was amazing. She is for all time.

Less known but equally worthy of remembrance is Sister Constance and her companions, a group of formerly cloistered nuns from New England who had been in Memphis, Tennessee about five years (in the 1870s) when yellow fever swept through that city for the third time in a decade.

More than half the people who lived there panicked. Those who could afford it, packed their bags and left town, but Constance and her group of nuns who were teased about their Yankee accents until then, stayed put to tend to the sick and the dying; putting cold rags on hot foreheads and emptying bed pans full of contagion.

Maybe they thought God would protect them from the virus, or maybe they were not thinking about themselves at all, I don’t know. I’m told that if you look really hard for it, you can find a round marker with all their names on it in the Elmwood Cemetery there in Memphis.

Well, it seems to me that you don’t necessarily have to face death to be a saint. You just have to make your peace with what it means to make a difference worth making in this world.

Sometimes saints aren’t recognized as such until they’re just about gone. I think of Osceola McCarty of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Almost no one in that town had any idea they were living with a saint until very late in her life. She was “just a laundress,” people said, an old black woman who had never married.

Ms. McCarty dropped out of school when she was in sixth grade and began a lifetime of washing clothes. That was the year her maiden aunt came out of the hospital. Unable to walk, she moved in with Osceola’s family.

Twelve-years-old, she left school to care for her and to help her mother and grandmother with their backyard laundry business. By the time her aunt recovered a year later, McCarty felt she was too far behind to return to school.

Which seems to me very sad, but she decided to just keep on working.

For the next 75 years that’s exactly what she did; scrubbing dark clothes on a washboard and boiling the whites in a big black pot before hanging them up to dry on the line. Her day started when the sun came up and it ended when it went down, summer and winter, and it was not until she was 87 years old that anyone really knew the kind of woman she was.

That was the year, 1995, that she gave $150,000 – her life savings, to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships benefiting young black scholars. That’s when reporters and photographers would discover her, and other local business people pledged to match her gift. The young woman who was the first recipient of one of those scholarships all but adopted her.

The question she got asked the most, of course, was, “Why didn’t you spend the money on yourself?” “I *am* spending it on myself,” she answered, and she meant it. Because that is what makes a saint – getting joy out of giving your life away.

And, you know what is the coolest thing about Osceola is that her example says this: anyone has what it takes to be a saint. Right? It has nothing to do with which side of the tracks you are born on, or how much education you have, or how well you know the Bible.

You don’t have to be Bill Gates. You just have to be the truest you that only you can be, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, or Portland, Oregon.

Amen