

Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

November 4, 2007
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23;
Luke 6:20-31

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You might say it was a strange way to spend the afternoon of New Year's Eve, but we did it anyway. Last December 31st my family and I took a short historical day trip across Cumberland County to Carlisle, and visited two cemeteries. I know, I know, you're thinking, "Wow, those Eastons sure know how to party on New Year's Eve." Actually, the two sites we visited were very interesting. First, we went to the Old Cemetery in Carlisle, and searched for a particular grave. In the Revolutionary War, at the Battle of Monmouth, the story goes, a woman named Mary Ludwig Hayes trudged back and forth from a nearby spring, bringing cool pitchers of water to the exhausted and thirsty soldiers of the colonies. Legend has it that she found her soldier husband wounded next to his cannon, and so she took his place, firing that cannon against the British troops. Her act of heroism has been told and re-told over the years. On Dec. 31st, we found the large monument erected in her memory and covering her remains. Mary Ludwig Hayes McCauley, forever after known as "Molly Pitcher."

Then we drove west out of Carlisle and found the Westminster Cemetery. There, a smaller, simpler headstone marks the burial spot of three young girls known as the "Babes in the Woods." In 1934, during the Great Depression, the bodies of these three children were found tucked under a blanket in the woods on South Mountain near Pine Grove Furnace. The people of Carlisle—initially not knowing the identities of these girls—were so shocked by the children's deaths they held a funeral service for them, and provided the funds to bury them properly in Westminster Cemetery. The nation was riveted to the story, and 10,000 people are said to have trooped into the funeral home to view the little girls—so many people it wore out the carpet. Eventually, the girls were identified. It was determined they'd been killed by their father. Police theorized their father—unemployed and penniless—may have killed them rather than let them starve to death. He killed himself as well, and his body was found a few days later. He is also buried in Westminster Cemetery, about 100 feet away.

Be they legendary and heroic or lesser-known and vulnerable—we humans desire both a way to remember those who have died and a way to commit them to God's eternal care. The Church has its own unique way of doing so on this All Saints Sunday: We say the names of those Trinity members and friends of Trinity who have died since last All Saints. We light a single candle for each one of them. We pray to God in thanksgiving for them all.

Of course, remembering the legendary and heroic is an easy enterprise. We tell the story of Molly Pitcher in our elementary school classrooms. And stalwarts of the Church who have died? The ones whose presence loomed large in congregational life and leadership? We tell their stories, too. Such stories comfort and encourage us on our faith journey as we recall these saints

living out their baptism, answering Christ's call to be his hands and feet, shining God's light in their own little corner of the world. All Saints Sunday is a blessing to you and me because it is an opportunity to remember and follow the example of faithful people who've gone before us.

But not all the saints are larger than life, or even heroic by society's standards. We do a disservice to those who have died in the faith when we so elevate them above us that we fail to see how really, truly human they were. We erect in our minds huge monuments in testimony to those we've labeled saints, but then we often can't deal with their vulnerabilities, their imperfections, their less-than-pristine moments. And all people, living and dead, have those less-than-pristine moments.

Two icons of our culture—Mother Theresa and Charles Schulz—have been knocked off their pedestals recently. First: Mother Theresa, the humble woman who dared to touch the Untouchables in India and cared for people on the lowest rungs of India's society. Her personal correspondence, now published after her death, indicates how, for years at a time, she was racked with doubt, despairing over what seemed to her to be the absence of God from her life.

And second: Charles Schulz, the cartoonist who made "Peanuts" a household word for over 50 years, whose round-headed character known as Charlie Brown never got to kick the football and always suffered unrequited love for the little red-haired girl. His just-published biography tells how much melancholy Charles Schulz suffered, how his public persona was not at all what he was like in private.

Discovering those things plainly disappoints some people. I, too, admit feeling a little jarred by those revelations. Yet, there is something important to be learned here. Mother Theresa and Charles Schulz were really, truly human. They were not perfect, no matter what kind of portrait we wish to paint of them. Some days—apparently many days—they both felt unloved and alone. They felt far from being either legendary or heroic. Their celebrity status meant little to them deep inside.

Jesus' words to his disciples and the crowds, as recorded by Luke in his Gospel, make clear he is not addressing those who are either legendary or heroic, well-known or popular. He's talking to people who are unknown and unimportant, the down-and-outs and the dispossessed, the broken and the sorrowful, the hungry and the vulnerable. Most of his listeners are people who stand firmly on the lowest rungs of society's ladder. They have reason to despair. Yet Jesus calls them to rejoice. He proclaims them blessed by God, because their God has come, revealing the truth of his kingdom and the extent of his power in the person of Jesus Christ, the one who stands before them right then and there, teaching them. The one who will die for them and rise again, bestowing his Holy Spirit on those who follow him. The one who promises that the kingdom over which he reigns will be theirs as well. The one who exhorts his people, in the meantime, to be generous as God is generous, to be merciful as God is merciful, to love as God loves.

I grieve the despair experienced by Mother Theresa and Charles Schulz. Why they should have experienced life in such a way is a mystery I cannot explain. But knowing what we **do** know about Mother Theresa and Charles Schulz, we should treasure the gifts they brought to our world all the more. Because those gifts obviously had to come from outside of them, beyond them and

what they were humanly capable of. Those gifts were from God. Mother Theresa was filled with and modeled our Lord's compassion as she ministered to the outcasts, the ones who were truly unloved and alone in India. Charles Schulz made us laugh and cry as we experienced Charlie Brown's toughest days and heard Linus' words of wisdom. What they did for our world was extraordinary. So, I consider the experience of Mother Theresa and Charles Schulz, and I think, well, all the more reason to be in awe of our God who manages to work through, and yes, often in spite of our frail humanity, our imperfections, bringing glimmers of hope and joy to a gloomy world.

Which leads me to this thought . . . if God could somehow shine his light through those who endured the darkest times of doubt, isn't there the possibility God could shine through anyone, anywhere? After all, haven't you and I experienced God's goodness through the lives and stories of those dear to us whom we name on this All Saints Sunday? Well, then—maybe, just maybe, God can shine his light and reveal his goodness even through you and me. We're not legendary. We're not heroes. We're just ordinary people called and empowered by God to do some pretty extraordinary things. **AMEN.**