



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Ordinary Saints

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

November 3, 2013

What a bit of serendipity that we celebrate one of Trinity's great saints on this All Saints Sunday. To my regret, I never got the chance to know Archie Hanna, but listening to the many recent conversations, I understand the desire to make a lasting statement of appreciation and affection for Archie's ministry and his life. He served as a faithful deacon-that sacred religious order of service, thought of as a link between the church and the world. His work life was in the world of book and to that he brought his faith and goodness. I have heard several people recount his sermon on the grand widow over the altar, bemoaning that the information all resided in his head and was never written down. Perhaps his affinity for stained glass as a teaching tool was what inspired the project that became the beautiful window that now bears his name. And on All Saints Sunday to boot!

What is a saint? According to Wikipedia, a saint is one who has been recognized for having an exceptional degree of holiness, sanctity, and virtue. When you hear that it could be easy to think it a fairly stilted and dull existence. But it is the virtue part that saves the definition of "saint" from dullness. For things like creativity, joy and humor are virtues along with prayerfulness, patience and the others. The website of The Virtues Project describes virtues this way: "Virtue means power, strength, inner quality. Virtues are the content of our character, the elements of the human spirit. They grow stronger whenever we use them. As a six year old once said, "Virtues are what's good about us."

This place is full of saints, people who commit significant portions of their lives to the well-being of this parish. Whether it's running the Altar Guild, keeping track of the finances, managing the website, fixing things that break, or simply being here on nearly every Sunday. Bringing what's good about us to this congregation gives our virtue a place to be expressed, magnified, and appreciated. These do not need to be heroic lives that will be chronicled in history books. They are the lives of regular people committed to a greater good.

We tend to think of saints as people who have been heroic or miraculous in some way. I however, like the way the ancient church thought about saints. Again Wikipedia tells us that "the original Christian usage referred to any believer who is "in Christ" and in whom Christ dwells, whether in heaven or in earth." Being a Christian in the truest sense of the word, following in Jesus' way, loving what he loved, living in a way that makes the Kingdom a bit more visible, was what qualified one to be a saint. I wonder what happened? Why did we make saints such an exclusive club with impossible qualifications? I propose that we reclaim the title. Let's give it Archie, and to Vinnie Austin and Rick Kennedy whose funerals were here yesterday. Let's give it to each other. If clothes make the man or woman, what will trying on such a status do for us?

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Here's a story that illustrates what might happen if we started thinking and living in this way.*

There was a monastery on the edge of a forest that had fallen on hard times. The one vibrant community now consisted of only four brothers and the abbot. The abbot was in despair of the apparent demise of the order. Now in the forest there was a small cottage where a very old rabbi came occasionally for retreat. One day, after seeing the rabbi on the path, the Abbot decided to seek advice from the old holy man. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could say, "I know how it is." "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other and he asked one final time, "Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi answered. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you one thing, the Messiah is one of you." The abbot left the clearing in the woods in deep thought and when he returned the four brothers asked him what had happened. He said, "The rabbi said something very odd, quite mysterious. He said that the Messiah is one of us." And the Abbot left to go pray.

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about what the rabbi had said. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? But, who?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our good leader for long time. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a gentle and holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred, who is so crotchety most of the time! But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often, very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But, surely not Brother Phillip? Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But he does have this gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. But suppose he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for you, could I? As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And then they began to love each other in a new way.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery on the edge of the forest, to picnic on the lawn, to wander in the garden, which was starting to look better. One evening a group of picnickers heard singing, beautiful chant coming from the chapel. There was something different about the air around them. Something holy. Looking in the chapel, there seemed to be a soft light coming from the five old

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men as they knelt and sang. There was something strangely compelling about the monastery now. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more often. They brought their friends to this peaceful place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery was once again a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and love.

* This story is from Dr. M. Scott Peck's *The Different Drum*.