

“When the Saints Go Marching In”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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Sambain, All Souls, Day of the Dead

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I didn't know the first thing about saints, really,
until I ended up in Vienna one morning with nothing to eat.

Twenty-five years ago, backpacking my way across Europe,
I arrived in Vienna on an overnight train on the 1st of November,
the Christian Feast of All Saints.

What I remember most clearly from that dreary fall day
is being incredibly hungry.

I got drenched as I walked the streets in driving rain
searching for a cafe or a store or food market that morning.

But nothing was open. Anywhere.

Oblivious to the holiday, it hadn't occurred to me
to grab food on the train before disembarking.

So, I was left to ponder, while unexpectedly fasting, just how
the word “feast” and my hunger pangs were supposed to fit together.

Eventually, I gave up my search and headed back to the train station,
where I played a strange game of trick-or-treat
with the one vending machine I could find.

I bought two chocolate bars and headed back out into the freezing drizzle,
wondering what all of this saintly nonsense was about.

Raised by a staunchly Protestant family,
I was taught to look upon saints with deep suspicion.

My Baptist upbringing led me to believe that those
who prayed to or through the saints were committing the sin of idolatry.

Which, of course, made seeing all those statues scattered about cathedrals
and European town squares all the more intriguing to me!
What had been a sin at home seemed to be running rampant elsewhere...

If I'm honest, I'm still a tad squeamish about putting anyone
on too high a pedestal, especially in matters of faith.

And yet, as I've grown older, I've come to a deepening appreciation for the
true costs people sometimes pay to live—and to lead—extraordinary lives.

We are right, I think, to look upon the lives of those we call great
to find examples on which we might model ourselves.

But I think there is a danger in setting the bar of sainthood so high
that we are completely intimidated by the thought that we, too,
might ever reflect anything of saintliness in our own lives.

The danger with a bar set too high is that most of us
don't bother to give sainthood a decent try.

That's why I've been fond of the great Anglican hymn,
"I Sing a Song of the Saints of God,"
since first hearing it, many years ago,
during a brief stint I spent with the Anglicans.

I thought I might sing it to you,
but then thought better of it and asked the choir. . .

I sing a song of the saints of God,
Patient and brave and true,
Who toiled and fought and lived and died
For the Lord they loved and knew.

And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
And one was a shepherdess on the green;
They were all of them saints of God, and I mean,
God help me, to be one too.

They loved their Lord so dear, so dear,
And his love made them strong;
And they followed the right for Jesus' sake
The whole of their good lives long.

And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
And one was slain by a fierce wild beast;
And there's not any reason, no, not the least,
Why I shouldn't be one too.

They lived not only in ages past,
There are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
Who love to do Jesus' will.

You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too.

What I cherish about this hymn is the claim that saintliness
isn't some far off goal available only to the most gifted or most devoted,
but can be found and, by intention, given life everywhere and in everyone.

Maybe I like that sentiment so much, because it sounds, to my ears,
like the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

The affirmation that there's a sacred spark burning within each of us.
That each life possesses inherent worth and dignity.
And that everyone, in this interdependent world,
has gifts to bring to the service of life on this planet.

Such is the saintly work our faith affirms as being the calling
of each person, by the mere fact of our being alive.

Now, obviously enough, some of us are better at this than others.
Some get the knack of saintly living sooner rather than later.
But it's never too late to get going.
For each of us has the potential, the promise, of being named a saint!

So I find myself speculating about our Unitarian Universalist saints,
wondering who we would name as having lived lives worth emulating.

Who are the exemplars that merit our attention?

Two names that come immediately to mind for me
are Martha and Waitsill Sharp.

Back in the late 1930s,
as the minister of the Unitarian Society of Wellesley Hills
(the congregation I served before coming here),
Reverend Sharp and his wife, a social worker,
set off for Europe, with the church's support,
to do what they could for the relief effort in Czechoslovakia,
leaving behind their young children
with members of the congregation for long periods of time.

When the Nazis took Prague on March 15, 1939,
the Sharps' mission suddenly shifted underground,
as they shuttled hundreds of "Jews and non-Jews, intellectuals, political leaders,
writers, artists, and children" safely away from harm.

Martha, using an American passport
and an uncanny ability to make a scene,
repeatedly risked her life to deliver scores of people
past Gestapo checkpoints by creating distractions here and there.

In the largest frame, she and her husband were able to sniff out where
the treacherous turn of events was taking the plot of history,
and they stepped out on faith, with all the courage they could summon,
to rewrite the story as best they could.

In 2007, their names were set in stone in Jerusalem,
as they were both honoured posthumously as
"Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem,
Israel's Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority—
the organization that lifts up the names of non-Jews
who risked their lives or their liberty
to help save others during the Holocaust.

I think they would qualify, then, as UU saints.

Yet, you should know their lives were far from perfect.
Indeed, sainthood isn't a constant state.

As inspiring as their story is, it gets a little more complicated.
Upon their return to the U.S., the Sharps' marriage ended.
After their time away, their children had become distant.

The Sharps paid a great and painful price to save the lives of others.
It was a cost they carried with them through the rest of their lives
and which reverberates still today in the lives of their descendants.

Their grandson, Artemis Joukowsky, who worked to uncover
the details of his grandparents' heroics,
found some measure of healing in confronting his family's history.

He explains that he now understands something of the dilemma his
grandmother faced.

He says, "She decided that saving other people's lives
and helping this terrible crisis was worth the tradeoff."

"She knew her children were being loved and cared for
and would ultimately understand that her being away from them would be
understood in the larger context of what was going on in the world."

Through meeting some of the people his grandparents rescued,
Joukowsky has come to see the positive aspects
of the difficult choices they made.

You can hear the healing in his voice when he says that,
"What happened to [his mother] as a child wasn't in vain.
When you can meet someone like Rosemarie Feigl,
who is such a grateful, loving soul, [it] is so clear
that her life would have ended without my grandmother."

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Another story. This one closer to home.

Nearly 50 years ago, a woman named Betsy was working

with other women in her church—First Unitarian in Detroit, Michigan—to create an underground railroad to help young American draft resisters emigrate to Canada.

Her many acts of kindness made a lasting impact on a man named Bill, who began a new life in this country with her help.

During his first weeks in Canada, he was introduced by his hosts to this congregation, which was welcoming of war resisters and, in fact, had a number of them, at the time, living downstairs in Shaw Hall as refugees of conscience.

Over the years, Bill and Betsy would forge a lasting friendship. Both Leos, they found common ground in a love of Bach and four-hand piano arrangements.

Shortly after Betsy Presley died last year, Dr. Bill Johnston decided to donate to First Unitarian in her memory, the two 17th century brass candlesticks on our Altar of Memory this morning.

It is a fitting tribute to this UU saint, a woman whose own daughter Lisa was ordained as a UU minister by this congregation several years ago.

And it is fitting now that Bill's own daughter, Eleanor, serves on First's Board of Trustees.

The legacy of love stemming from Betsy's efforts affects us even today.

Indeed, over the last five years, it's been our privilege to dedicate Bill's granddaughters Josephine and Charlotte, both of whom I noticed last Sunday were wearing amazingly sparkly outfits!

Dr. Johnston, my hope is that your granddaughters—and truly each of us—will be reminded of what love in action looks like, when they see these commemorative candlesticks in use on Christmas Eve or holding Shabbat candles at the Passover Seder.

Thank you for this gift to our congregation, and for honouring Betsy, whose efforts to put her faith into action, changed your life forever.

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Finally, I find it impossible to give thought
to the hundreds of people saved
by the risks taken by Martha and Waitsill Sharp,
to the underground railroad built by Unitarians and others
to help bring war resisters to Canada,
and not invite us to ponder deeply the historical moment
in which we find ourselves.

We are living through what is arguably the largest-scale dislocation
of people from their homes in human history.

The horrific realities of civil war have given rise to the situation
that has been unfolding for four years now in Syria.

Sadly, Syria isn't the only country displacing her people.
There are at this moment, 51.2 million refugees in the world.

I've never been prouder of this congregation than in watching us all
step up in recent months to support our Syrian Refugee Project.

We have built a partnership with the Muslim Association of Canada and,
together, are working to create a lifeline that will rescue a number of Syrian
families in the coming months.

This is an enormous undertaking, and a sacred responsibility
for those of us here who covenant, each week, to “serve life.”

Much will be asked of us—in terms of money and practical support—
as we help these people take up new lives in Canada.

In short, we will be called to put our faith into practice,
and our love into action.

As you well know, the strain of taking on refugees
has created a crisis across Europe,
and brought forth a vitriolic response from some quarters—
as it may well do here, as Canada and First Unitarian step up to do our parts.

If that happens, we must never forget in all of this

the great call of life, the deep duty of love.

The enormity of this was brought home to me this week as I read the powerful words of Warsan Shire, the Kenyan-born, Somali poet, whose poem has gone viral online in a speech given by Benedict Cumberbatch each night in London following his performance of *Hamlet*.

Her poem is simply called “Home.”

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.
no one leaves home unless home chases you
fire under feet
hot blood in your belly
it's not something you ever thought of doing
until the blade burnt threats into
your neck
and even then you carried the anthem under
your breath
only tearing up your passport in an airport toilet
sobbing as each mouthful of paper
made it clear that you wouldn't be going back.
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land
no one burns their palms
under trains
beneath carriages
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled
means something more than journey.
no one crawls under fences

no one wants to be beaten
pitied
no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison,
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father
no one could take it
no one could stomach it
no one skin would be tough enough
the
go home blacks
refugees
dirty immigrants
asylum seekers
sucking our country dry
[beggars] with their hands out
they smell strange
savage
messed up their country and now they want
to mess ours up
how do the words
the dirty looks
roll off your backs
maybe because the blow is softer
than a limb torn off
or the words are more tender
than fourteen men between
your legs
or the insults are easier
to swallow
than rubble
than bone
than your child's body
in pieces.
i want to go home,

but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home told you
to quicken your legs
leave your clothes behind
crawl through the desert
wade through the oceans
drown
save
be hunger
beg
forget pride
your survival is more important
no one leaves home until home
is a sweaty voice in your ear
saying-
leave,
run away from me now
i don't know what i've become
but i know that anywhere
is safer than here

Friends, we live in a time demanding the courage and conviction of saints.

In our runabout world,
as we juggle the laundry and dinner and homework,
the kids and our careers,
it's often a struggle just to maintain our ties
with those whom we love most.

Committing ourselves, on top of it all,
to working for the greater good of the world
can seem like too much to ask.

There may seem to be no time in our schedule
for putting a stop to genocide or world hunger, at least not this week.

But I am reminded—haunted, really—by Annie Dillard's sage wisdom that:

“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

As we seek to discern what life—what history—is asking of us,
as we try to balance what we owe to those we love,
with what we owe to strangers half a world away,
may we be guided by the grace of knowing
that even small acts of kindness can help bring healing to our world.

We can't and won't be able to do all that we should, or arguably could.
But let our hearts be broken open to the possibility that we could do more.

Put your faith into action.
Let courage speak through your life.
Let love be your legacy, long after you're gone.



In Catholicism, three miracles attributed to a person after they have died
are required to begin the process of canonization for sainthood.

I'm not a big believer in the type of miracles typically cited.

But I am persuaded again and again by women and men
who endeavour to use what is inside them to build a better world
not merely for themselves, but for others, as well.

On this day when our hearts are tender
for those whose lives have ended,
let us recall the miracles, great and small,
that they managed in their lifetimes.

To give from what they had, to love beyond their limits,
to show courage when faced with fear and uncertainty.

And inspired by their example, let us strive on to become saints, as well.

Because, I don't know about you, but I mean to be one, too!

Amen.