

# An All Saints Treasury

## Scriptures

Rev 7:9-17

Ps 149

Eph 1:11-23

Lk 6:20-36

## Opening

I was flipping through my great-grandfather's recipe box a few weeks ago, a collection containing no recipes, only index card-sized book summaries from the novels he read. I never met my grandmother's father. He died when my mother was 4. Yet I have this wooden box, jammed with book summaries from his life of reading.

We have different tastes, he enjoying popular fiction more than myself. Most of the titles he read don't interest me, but give me a grandparent with a literary habit and count me interested. Thumbing through hundreds of index cards, I find a title we have in common. I read his summary of Rumer Godden's *In This House of Brede*, and I remember why I'm interested in this book. It's been called a classic of Catholic fiction. And as my good fortune would have it, I found a first edition of Godden's novel on my bookshelf from the last Friends of the Library sale, purchased for a scandalous \$2.00. Sometimes books find you, don't they? I read this novel a bit differently, not because it was a great find for a mere two dollars; not because I have a vintage first edition; I read this story with a different awareness because it's a story I have in common with a great-grandfather I never met, a bond with an ancestor who loved books and stories as I do.

All Saints Day is a day for stories. The bond we share with our ancestors in the faith are the stories about our Lord Jesus Christ and his Church. We read the same Gospels our ancestors read. We learn to pray the same psalms the saints have prayed. We learn how to live

together in Christ reading the same letters by Paul, Peter, John, and James. These are the family treasures we carry with us.

But we read and live these stories in a different era from the saints who have gone before us. Yet the calling remains the same across the generations: we are called to embrace the virtues of the Kingdom of God. We look to the saints from ages past because we see obedience and an application of Jesus' commandments in *their* lives. Hearing their stories helps us practice the art of faithful obedience in *our* lives and times.

So what I'd like to do is increase your inventory of stories this morning. I had a grandfather who preached the virtue of inventory regarding groceries and household items like lightbulbs. "Inventory! You need inventory!" He would say. Or rather, shout. I say we need a good inventory of stories from the saints.

So I want to stir your imagination with a few testimonies of the saints. We profess our belief in the communion of the saints. Let's increase that inventory, increase our treasury a bit this morning, with stories from the saints.

## The Little Way of St Therese Lisieux

We read Luke's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this morning, a simpler form of the beatitudes where he proclaims blessing over the poor, the hungry, the mourners, the rejected. He proclaims blessing over those who have been humbled and humiliated. He declares grace over those who would be otherwise forgotten.

With these similar words of blessing, I think about the wonderfully humble though abbreviated life of St Therese of Lisieux.

Therese chose poverty and entered a convent in Lisieux, France in 1887 at the age of 15. She had no great ambitions in her life. In fact, she went the other direction, embracing simplicity and a humble rhythm of prayer and service. She loved flowers and wanted to glorify the Lord just by being herself, to be 'a little flower of Jesus.' Yet this young girl wasn't exempt from darkness. She wrestled with doubts, fears, and probably clinical depression.

Those were the interior battles she faced, but her greatest affliction was tuberculosis, from which she died at the young age of 24. <sup>1</sup>

“What matters in life,” Therese said, “is not great deeds, but great love.” /

Therese was not afraid of obscurity. She did not need to change the world. She embraced her smallness with great joy. In a letter Therese sent to her sister, she wrote: “Let us keep far from everything that shines, let’s love our littleness...then we will be poor in spirit, and Jesus will come and look for us. However far away we are, he will transform us into flames of love.”<sup>2</sup>

There is much more to share from this abbreviated and lovely life, yet I find myself simply meditating on the beauty of her simplicity. What might great love look like in our time? What would it mean to love my littleness in our rancorous age filled with noise and argument?

It’s interesting that in embracing her littleness God deemed her life worthy of honor. The Catholic Church gave Therese of Lisieux the title Doctor of the Church, which is a title only bestowed upon persons who make a significant contribution to theology and doctrine. And her great wisdom was her humility, her simplicity. Dig deeper in stories like hers and you’ll find guidance about how to be sane, simple, and whole in these divisive times.

## St Basil

We live in divisive times, but it doesn’t compare to the age of St Basil. Basil was a consummate pastor of his diocese in Caesarea. He cared for his people through a famine and had a major humanitarian project called *Basiliead* to live Jesus’ commands to love the poor. It’s believed that Basil had medical training himself and thus he founded one of the first hospitals for the sick, staffed by doctors, surgeons, and nurses. He also built a hostel for poor travelers and a kind of ancient soup kitchen for the hungry. Anyone who says

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.littleflower.org/therese/>

<sup>2</sup> St Therese of Lisieux, Letter 197, September 17, 1896.

Christians are bigots and people of hate simply don't know the story of St Basil. You don't have the institution of hospitals without St Basil.

Basil confessed the orthodox faith we confess in the Nicene Creed, but he confessed that Fatih when orthodox Christians didn't have political power. Had they spoken in the parlance of our day, they would have said Basil was on the wrong side of history. Orthodox Christians were persecuted for their faith in the Holy Trinity and such was Basil's fate.

The Emperor Valens sent his prefect, Modestus, to Basil and demanded he recant his faith. Modestus said to Basil, "Do you know what I can do to you? I can confiscate your possessions, banish you, torture you, put you to death." Basil replied, "Is that all? None of these things trouble me." To which Modestus said, "No one ever addressed Modestus in such a manner til now." Basil replied, "No doubt, you never met a bishop until now."

Modestus said, "I'll give you til tomorrow to change your mind." In the meantime, the Emperor sent other intellectuals and officials to persuade Basil to denounce the orthodox faith. None of it worked. Modestus came back the next day, drew a sword in front of Basil's face and said, "I will cut out your liver." Basil said, "Well, I'd be grateful if you would because my liver has had serious problems. It probably needs to come out anyway to relieve my suffering." <sup>3</sup> Said the man who had medical training and established the first hospitals. He knew his body, but he even more, he knew who his real King was. Saints can have a calm and sure courage in the face of attack. We belong to King Jesus who promised he would not leave or forsake us even to the end of the ages.

## **The Southern Saints of *Koinonia Farm***

Well, I have one final story to share, this one a bit closer to home. When Anglicans celebrate All Saints Day, we make room for Southern Baptists and not just because Baptists invited us to this building back in 2006. In the Southern Baptist saint, Clarence Jordan, we

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<sup>3</sup> The narrative of St Basil's trial and martyrdom is taken from Robert Payne, *The Holy Fire: The Story of the Fathers of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1957), 129-130.

have an example of what it means to love well, love our enemies, here in the American South.

Clarence Jordan was a native of Georgia and because I don't wish to risk offending our native Georgians, I will hereafter pronounce our Southern Baptist saint according to his native dialect: Clarence Jur-den.

Jordan was not your ordinary Southern Baptist pastor and when he was courting the woman who would become his bride, he told her as much. While Jordan attended Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he fell in love with Florence Kroeger, but wrestled with his calling to a very different kind of ministry. Jordan declared to Florence, "if you want to be the wife of an important preacher at a First Baptist Church, then you shouldn't marry me." Florence Kroeger wasn't deterred and so Florence Kroeger became Florence Jordan.

After graduating from seminary and completing a doctorate in New Testament Greek, the Jordans sensed God calling them to return to Georgia in 1942. Jordan had the credentials for academia but he felt called to live and enact the Sermon on the Mount in rural Georgia in a radical way. He wanted to gather a community of faith across racial lines.

Before he studied theology, Jordan studied agriculture at the University of Georgia and he wanted to address the economic poverty caused by the Great Depression even as he cared for the spiritual poverty of his community. So Jordan purchased around 440 acres in Americus, Georgia, of exhausted, uninhabitable farmland to rehabilitate the soil and grow an interracial Christian community there.

So they began repairing buildings and fences. They began growing crops and practiced local farming methods. Their small community of friends—black and white—at meals together. The community would become known as Koinonia Farm. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship from Acts 2.42. But the Greek doctor, Jordan, knew that Koinonia, meant so much more than fellowship. It meant living life together.

Now remember this is southern Georgia in the early 1940s. This is more than two decades removed from the Civil Rights Act; more than two decades before Georgia's most famous saint would stand at the Lincoln Memorial and say "I have a dream..."

So it should not surprise us that in the early 1940s when white and black Christians gathered for an evening meal on Koinonia Farm that supper was interrupted by an inhospitable visit from the Ku Klux Klan. The spokesman from the Klan declared to Jordan with hateful words that he would not allow the sun to set on proceedings such as this.

Jordan wasn't anxious at the announced threat. He just kept chewing his supper. But then he arose with the good humor God gives to so many of his saints. Jordan walked to the Klansman, grasped his hand, and said, "Why, I just graduated from Southern Baptist Seminary, and they told us there about folks who had power over the sun, but I never hoped to meet one here in Sumter County." Jordan made everyone laugh, Klansman included, and the evening concluded in peace.

Peace wouldn't last forever on Koinonia Farm though. Racism runs deep and in years to come the community of Koinonia Farm would suffer from violent raids on their farm, burning of crosses and buildings, bombings of their roadside markets. Many citizens in Americus boycotted the produce from Koinonia Farm. If Georgia pecans hadn't been so desired around the rest of the country, they probably wouldn't have survived the local economic violence.

Jordan and his community wrestled with what to do amid all manner of violence. They believed the teachings of Jesus required a nonviolent response, but they wondered what to do regarding the safety of their children.

After much conversation, prayer, and discernment, they believed God called them to stay. It was the Sermon on the Mount that inspired Jordan as a young man and it was the Sermon on the Mount that guided him in crisis. He believed the calling was to stay because Jesus commanded that we love our enemies. "Shall we go and leave (our enemies) without hope? We have too many enemies to leave them," Jordan said. "The redemptive love of God must somehow break through. If it costs us our lives, if we must be hung on a cross to redeem our brothers and sisters in the flesh, so let it be. It will be well worth it."

This kind of witness became known, not just by enemies in Sumter County, Georgia, but by admirers around the country. One such admirer was Millard Fuller who eventually moved to Koinonia Farm in 1968. Fuller had been a businessman and a millionaire in the late 1960s. But he sold his wealth, gave it to the poor, and moved to Koinonia Farm to support

Jordan's vision. You may not be familiar with Koinonia Farm until today (or maybe you were), but I imagine all of us are familiar with the organization Millard Fuller founded, Habitat for Humanity. <sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

How we need stories of all saints in our time, saints who were faithful to our Lord's teaching. I do not have the same calling as Clarence Jordan and his story doesn't give me an easy "how-to" in 2019, but his story fires my imagination, and my imagination becomes prayer, and Lord, have mercy, may my prayer become Gospel obedience.

When I have shared three stories with you of the saints, I'm more aware of how many more I wish we could tell. But time fails me to tell you of Elder Thaddeus, who become a wise spiritual elder to thousands after two nervous breakdowns; or Madeleine Delbrel, who renounced a comfortable existence as a trendy socialite to love and serve ordinary people on the streets of Paris; or St Monica, patron saint of long suffering parents, who loved her son, Augustine, into the Kingdom; or Leona Phelps, who followed the call of God to plant Apostles Anglican in Knoxville in her 90s, devoting her days to prayer and a simple witness of "resting in the Lord". We are not carbon copies of our fathers and mothers in faith, nor should we be. But we tell their stories because in their stories we find our meaning in the Great Story of God, we learn how the Lord summoning us to love and faithfulness in our time. Remember St Therese, "What matters is not great works, but great love."

So I hope you have more inventory than when you arrived today. And I hope you have a renewed imagination today. For this is our treasury, the stories of the saints, for the glory of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> I have relied on the narratives of Clarence Jordan's life and ministry at Koinonia Farm from the following webpages: <https://www.koinoniafarm.org/history-center/articles/the-dream-that-has-endured-clarence-jordan-and-koinonia/> and <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/witness/clarence-jordan>