

The Wisdom of the Saints: The Reformation We Need

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Isaiah 55:6-9; I Corinthians 1:26-28, 3:16-19; Matthew 22:34-40

We remember heroes and great souls on All Saints Day. On Reformation Sunday we remember particularly those heroes who dedicated their lives to reforming the consciousness, institutions and governments of a society that needed to change.

We remember them not out of sentimentality or nostalgia. We remember them because we believe they embodied the Holy Spirit, which is a name we give to the force that created the universe and brought all life into being and is still guiding our evolution in the direction of more abundant life and love.

We honor heroic saints and reformers best not by singing their praises but by following the sacred way they tried to follow. We circle back on this Sunday every year to pick up their path again, and try again to live as they lived.

Today I am going to talk about both personal and public dimensions of this path. Many of us have personal struggles that feel all-consuming at times. We need to remember that we are part of the same movement whether it takes place hidden in our hearts or in our relationship with one person or in an office or in the streets or in the halls of government.

Those struggles all share the same goal of serving the cause of love and life and light. Every gain of love and more abundant life is a gain for the realm of God on earth.

Our task is to go where we feel called to serve in any particular moment, and all our lives are in a shared context that makes our efforts more important than ever.

Thomas Keating died two years ago last week. He was a Trappist monk and spiritual teacher and one of the great saints of our age. He helped develop and promote Centering Prayer as a reformulation of ancient Christian contemplative practices.

Two weeks before he died, Keating fell into a coma. Four days later, though, he shocked his caretakers and monastic community by emerging from his coma with a message for the world that he had received while unconscious.

He said, “Dear friends: In the universe, an extraordinary moment of civilization seems to be overtaking us. Through the great discoveries of science and spirituality we find ourselves in essentially a new and different place than ever before in history. It’s a time of enormous expectancy and possibility.

We are called to start—not with the old world contracts, now that we know that they are all lies—but [with] what we know as the truth as proved by silence and science.

So I call upon the nations to consider this as a possibility: that we should begin a new world with one that actually exists. This is the moment to manifest this world....

“This will allow and offer the world the marvelous gift of beginning, [of] creating, of trusting each other, of forgiving each other, and of showing compassion, care for the poor, and putting all our trust in the God of heaven and earth.”

As Keating said, advanced science and contemplative silence both lead us to the vision of a world of oneness and love, the world that the Spirit of heaven and earth is trying to help evolve. The saints have shared with us the wisdom and vision to make that new world. Practical thinkers and inventors have developed the new systems and technology. Everything is in place, everything is poised to be put in motion to transform our world.

What we need are the heroes and saints to make it happen. So whether our calling is to serve one small situation or engage in a wider struggle, the most fundamental task for us each is to gain the wisdom and power to be the heroes and saints the world needs us to be.

Today’s scriptures map out the inner journey that leads to having that higher power.

Isaiah calls us to return to God, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says our God.”

The Apostle Paul wrote, “If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”

The path to wisdom begins in recognizing that the ego’s thoughts are not the Spirit’s thoughts, and the ego’s ways are not the Spirit’s ways. So we have to let go, we have to empty ourselves of the ego, which in Christian tradition is called by the Biblical Greek word, kenosis.

This is the step we take over and over in Centering Prayer and other contemplative practices. It is also the step that happens to us when a crisis occurs in our lives and we hit rock bottom, or when a great love comes along and we give ourselves entirely to it.

The second step is reflected in Isaiah’s command to forsake our old ways and seek the Spirit. Paul says, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.”

This second step is called metanoia, and it is the movement from the ego’s realm into the Spirit’s, from a limited level of consciousness into an expanded vision that can see more as God sees.

This happens gradually through contemplative practice, but it can happen quickly when we confront a major crisis.

The third step is what Jesus summed up as the essence of all the wisdom of the saints before him, all the law and the prophets. The name of this third step is agape, which is the love that naturally flows through us when we have emptied ourselves of our self and expanded to the greater heart and mind of the Spirit, as we saw in Jesus.

The wisdom of these three steps of kenosis, metanoia and agape is that we are not who we think we are when we look at things from the ego’s point of view. Through this inner journey we come to see the truth that we are all one, all expressions of the one Spirit

that created, evolved and still flows through all life. The Golden Rule and love of neighbor as our self naturally flow through us when have this expanded consciousness.

The African-American philosopher Cornell West wrote, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” A healthy democracy is what oneness and love look like in a nation. A healthy ecosystem is what oneness and love look like on a planet.

This inner transformation is the single most heroic thing we can do, and every one of us can do it even if we can do nothing else. We need us all to do it because as Gus Speth, Albert Einstein and many others have said, we will not be able to make the changes necessary to save our world unless our entire culture has this change of consciousness.

So every person who takes the hero’s journey from kenosis to metanoia to agape is serving the world’s most crucial need.

We can fulfill the vision of Thomas Keating and the dream of all the saints before us. It will take our entire lives, it will take all of us answering our calling and healing, talking, praying, singing, building, lobbying, protesting and teaching together, but we can do this.

All the saints are with us, offering their examples and their wisdom and inspiration, cheering us on in this life or death struggle to reform our world.

Let us pray in silence...