

Sermon: “What About Saints?” (Laurel)

My grandparents were Presbyterians in the winter and Unitarians in the summer. As it is for many people, that was less a theological stance and more a matter of practicality and geography. When they went to the Cape for the summer, they donned their gardening hats and attended the Unitarian church.

But nestled in the back of the yard, shrouded in ever growing rhododendrons, sheltered by thick leaves and magenta blooms was a weathered gray statue of St. Francis. He’s still there, though the rhododendrons are threatening to swallow him.

That alone is unremarkable, but in the kitchen there’s a also tile painting of St. Francis, hanging unimposingly on the side of the cabinet.

St. Francis is the patron saint of animals and the environment, so the garden statue makes sense to me - maybe the local garden store sold them next to the lilacs and the lily bulbs.

But the painting in the kitchen - and the absence of all other saint references - makes me wonder. It must have meant something to my grandmother, but I don’t know what, not in her words. Like a good Scots-Canadian protestant who lived through the depression, she was not sentimental or particularly open about her inner world. The role of St. Francis in her life remains something of a mystery.

If we zoom out and try to state things simply, saints are people who lived lives of such holiness that the impact of their goodness and their spirit extends beyond their death. They lived lives that are still inviting us to be better. St. Francis is still gracing the gardens we tend, still asking us to notice the birds.

We Unitarian Universalists aren't doing any canonization - that process belongs to the Catholic church - but we do still have that impulse, which I assume most traditions have, that impulse to take note of the people whose goodness and wonder and courage is contagious and unconfined by death.

And to be a UU is to be engaged in the process of seeking, of making meaning of the world and making sense of our own lives. There are also a really high percentage of UUs who used to be Catholic, so I take it as a given that some of you have a beloved statue of St. Francis amongst your flowers, or maybe St. Anthony brings you comfort, or Mother Theresa inspires you. That's good and that's valid.

To say there are many sources of wisdom is to acknowledge religious pluralism in its fullness. So yes, saints are a thing that exist in the world. The question, really, is what that means to you. Which, also in a very UU fashion, I can't tell you exactly. Which saint was in your grandmother's garden? What prayers come to you in moments of grasping for anything that might help in a moment of panic or powerlessness.

As I said, I've heard it joked that Mary Oliver is a UU saint because we so revere her poetry. And maybe to you she really is one in the same way our reading stated - her life and her work tells you something of holiness, gives you some access to a kind of transcendence, draws you back into a place of wonder that defies despair.

It is part of our Unitarian heritage that we value direct experience, our own place in the world of mystery and transcendence, and I think Saints are a door, an invitation into someone else's transcendence, an experience so profound it spills over and fills in when we feel the absence of something holy, when we need a hand in seeking the treasures of wonder and conviction.

I'm not suggesting we can go around calling anyone a saint, we UUs are, again, not in charge of such things. But we can notice where we turn when we need an invitation into something holy, when we need inspiration for living more fully, more honestly, more kindly.

Even if you've arrived in this place having left another religious tradition behind, that doesn't mean you have to shed everything that came before. My hope is that this is a place where there's room to make sense of the relics you carry from the other places you once called home. There is space here to let it all breathe, to wonder about your grandmother's saints and what it all means for you.

Here, too, is an invitation to explore what fills your spirit in new ways. Maybe saints aren't it. Maybe it's your favorite tree or the magnitude of the ocean reminding you of your place in the great mystery of life, pulling you back to the thing at the center of your one wild and precious life. Maybe it's an author or an organizer who helps you imagine a better world, whose life inspires you towards a life of greater meaning.

Valuable things are not easy to find, those gems of living, and yet people do manage to attune themselves to the depths of meaning. Maybe this is why all the saints represent different things - there isn't one kind of magic to be found, it's the attention to the seeking that matters.

And maybe tell the story of what you find. I don't know why my grandmother loved St. Francis. I wish I did. I imagine knowing would have lent some sweetness, some magic to my memories of her garden and her life.

If the saints are any indication, it is a blessing to share our experience of goodness and sweetness and sacred living, to invite others into that place of courage and wonder.

Amen.