

### “Saints Abound”

Have you ever read something—a sentence, a paragraph, a poem, a song—and said to yourself there is so much in there I need to read this again. And you read it again and it requires another reading. You might put it down after that but as you continue to ponder it and turn it over and over in your mind you need to return to it. There is something so rich and profound in the words and thoughts expressed that you can't let go of it. You want to get every bit of meaning out of it. You want wring it dry.

That is the way I felt about this week's passage from Luke. There are so many themes that pulled at me. For example, there is the meaning of discipleship, the cost of discipleship, life in Christian community, service, and how we treat those who serve us. But the one word that kept gnawing at me was “faith.”

Faith is more than a word signifying a set of hopes or beliefs. Faith is about a way of living. It is a way of journeying through life.

There are many ways to walk through this life. We can live in fear of the world around us and of others. We can live blithely ignorant of our world and its joys and its sorrows. We can be blissed out with an attitude characterized by the phrase, “It's all good.” We can also be greedy clawing our way to the top regardless of the hurt we cause along the way. Another way, the Gospel way, is to walk by faith. Putting our trust in the goodness of God and of God's creation, and trusting in God regardless of what life throws at us. It is relatively straightforward even if it is not easy.

Two people come to my mind when I think about those who walked in faith. First is St. Francis whom we remember on October 4 and when we have the Blessing of the Animals service. But saints can be so hard to relate to if for no other reason than they are saints, heroes of the faith. There is another person not nearly so heroic perhaps or widely remembered who inspires my faith.

Her name was Martha Elizabeth McCalley Chinn, but everyone called her Mattie, Mattie-Mae or Miss Mattie. Miss Mattie was a school teacher and a tough one. She expected a lot out of her students, and was known for grading hard. I expect that her students were more likely to get Cs than any other grade. She did not grade hard because she thought her students were stupid. She wanted to draw the best from them. Despite her tough grading her students loved her. I think it is because she respected them and didn't look down on them just because they were poor, and most of them were very poor.

The children she taught were the sons and daughters of poor farmers and laborers. Their parents did not have a lot of money when times were good, and much of the time they just scraped by. Many did not have food other than what they could grow. Their clothes often had patch on top of patch. They did anything necessary to hold their clothes and their lives together. A lot of kids would come to school for the month of September and then go to work on the farm to harvest the crops in October. They would come back to school weeks later, and try to catch up on their studies. It

was hard for them and for their teacher. It was even harder because it was a one-room schoolhouse, which meant that there were kids from first grade through sixth grade all in the same room. How she kept up with who was learning what and made sure everyone was making progress is beyond me. But Miss Mattie did it.

Mattie also knew which of her students did not have food to eat or decent clothes to wear. While Miss Mattie's family was also just scraping by she would be sure to bring a sandwich or two, some pears from her tree in the backyard, or something from her garden for those children who did not have lunch. When she saw a child with ragged clothes, she would bring that child clothing that belonged to one of her four children. She made sure her students were not too hungry to learn or ashamed to come to school.

I knew that a lot of people loved and respected Miss Mattie. In fact many people treated her like a saint. They told me how good a teacher she was, but no one ever told me about how she clothed and fed her students. I did not know these stories until many years after her death. As much as I loved and respected Miss Mattie her acts were a revelation to me. I loved Miss Mattie too and I would have loved her no matter what, because she was my grandma. Knowing what I know about her now, I can see why so many people treated her like a saint.

That, my friends, is faith. Whether the heroic faith of Francis or the simple faith of my grandmother. Each had a faith that transcended the conditions of their lives and centered itself in the divine and unconditional love of God. I think Francis and Mattie lived the Gospel of Jesus, because they did not know how to do anything else. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. The solution is as straightforward for us as it was for them and St. Francis and Miss Mattie. Live the Gospel as best you know how today, and your faith will grow and keep growing beyond anything you can imagine.