

“For All the Saints” by Marjory Bankson

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Who are these saints, whose pictures grace the altar table today? I see no famous people. No world-class martyrs. Or pop heroes either. Just a lot of ordinary faces – most lined with care and experience. Most have a twinkle in the eye suggesting a kind of life-force that we loved in them – or felt from them.

Here at Seekers, we don't have a list to read of those who have died this year. In fact, nobody has died out of our fellowship – and that's usually when we designate somebody a "saint" – after they're gone. Since we have no new names to add to our memory wall in the back stairwell, I want to take this occasion to encourage you to write your own piece for our memory book (indicate book on the altar). Here at Seekers, we'd like you to describe who you are in your own words for the next generation. And add a picture too.

A Tile

I was tempted to ask for a tile commemorating our former home

at 2025 Massachusetts Avenue, which has now been sold. And maybe another one for the Wellspring Mission Group, which is setting down its call to run the Wellspring Center out at Dayspring Farm.

Who we are as a church community and how we are with each other have been shaped by the old brownstone at 2025 and by the open fields around Wellspring, where we gathered for family overnights twice a year for most of our 35-year history, until we moved to this building in 2004. Then interest waned and we suspended those casual gatherings because people stopped attending.

I have a hunch that Wellspring gave us a place to party and play together that we didn't have at 2025 – because we didn't feel that was “our space.” Now that we have our own building, where we can worship and work together, play and pray together, going out to Wellspring became less important to our common life. Maybe the sale of 2025 and the end of Wellspring mission group belong on our memorial wall, to honor the saints in our story as an emerging church.

The saints who purchased the brownstone at 2025 Mass Avenue back in 1950 for \$60,000 could not have imagined that the property would be sold for \$4 million dollars sixty years later. Muriel Lipp is the only one sitting here who can tell us about those early visionaries – ordinary people who were inspired to such extraordinary sacrifice.

Just two years after that, three young women from the tiny congregation at 2025 found a 200-acre farm for sale in what

was then the deserted countryside near Gaithersburg. On Easter, 1953, money was collected to make a downpayment on that farm and Dayspring was born. Twenty years later, the Wellspring Center was built on that property through a grant from the Lily Foundation. Its mission was to offer a place where churches could experience the Church of the Saviour model of empowering ministry by all members through an intentional inward and outward journey.

Part of our legacy from those earlier saints is surely the community gathered here today as Seekers Church. In 1976, five little churches formed out of the original body of Church of the Saviour. Since then, others formed and a total of nine still exist. Each has its own character and its own place of worship, but we still own the Dayspring Farm together. It is now our last remaining piece of common property. We are all stakeholders there.

Something you may not know is that the Wellspring Mission Group did not belong to the Dayspring Church. Through Carol Fitch and John Mohr, Wellspring had a closer connection with Eighth Day Church, but that was not an official link. And now that the Wellspring Mission Group is setting down its call, the Dayspring Church is becoming the steward of those buildings without the infrastructure to continue its mission.

I hope that the seeds of a new call are buried somewhere in the wider church but we do not know that yet.

Legacy

Meanwhile, each of the CoS churches received a share of the proceeds from the sale of 2025 this week. We have been anticipating this for some while, thanks to Kate's role as

chairman of the Ecumenical Council and Keith's role as our representative to the Council. (I would nominate them as saints in this story too.)

Stewards had several sessions on money while 2025 was on the market, anticipating the sale. Last January, the School of Christian Living sponsored two sessions with Kim Montroll and Mike Little, to help us think creatively about how to use a large chunk of money. Nearly half of the congregation, members and Stewards alike, attended those classes. Most favored using some of the money to pay down our building debt and to reserve the rest for a special purpose. Housing was a strong interest among those present. More recently, we had a sermon by Andrew McLeod about his work with Christian credit unions in less-developed parts of the world. The discussion that followed after church was lively and well-attended. Again, the sense of that gathering favored doing something particular with the legacy we have now received. We just don't know what it is yet.

Our history with money has also been significant. If you will bear with me, I'd like to share some of that story which could be subtitled "How saints are shaped by need."

In the first year of Seekers' existence, the Stewards decided to allocate 20% of our yearly budget for space, and then plan to give away half of what remained – what they called "the 50-50 rule." Whenever a bequest brought in unexpected additional funds, we put those in a Manna loan fund – to be used for rehabbing low-income housing in the city. Over the years, we lived on our current income and let Manna use God's extra gifts and bequests because banks were hesitant to loan money for inner-city restoration. When the decision was made

in 1995 to disband Church of the Saviour and to retain 2025 for a 3-year period rather than offer Seekers the long-term stewardship of the building, we knew we would have to find other space. We began to look for new worship space and decided to add any net income from the operating budget to what we called "the Future Fund."

When it came time for Seekers to move out of 2025, we had accumulated \$345,000 in our Future Fund – enough to pay cash for this building. However, we had nothing for its renovation – and it needed a lot! About a million dollars worth, it seemed. At the same time, Sonya Dyer, the second of our two founders, left Seekers and moved with her husband, Manning, to North Carolina. That brought us to a crisis point, both spiritually and financially. Would other saints would emerge?

What I can tell you from experience is that saints don't usually appear from nowhere. Instead, they are shaped and formed by a thousand little decisions along the way. When Seekers faced a crisis of leadership, new leaders emerged. When we faced a financial crisis with this bedraggled building, people who had already been giving generously dug deeper into their reserves. Instead of hiring an outside consultant, we relied on our own resources. By October of 2000, we had collected almost a million dollars to begin the renovation. In round figures, we had \$250,000 in outright gifts and 24 loans for another \$650,000.

This beautiful space is the result. Not only did some of the saints among us spend countless hours with contractors to plan and execute the renovation, but widespread financial participation gave us all a stake in making this our home.

One of the major concerns was how home-ownership would affect our culture of generosity. Would the building soak up our funding for missions? In response to that concern, Stewards voted to keep our external giving at the same level as it was when the renovation began. And when we settled into our new space, external giving began to increase once again along with a growing sense that the building itself was a “ministry of place.”

Today, our Sunday offerings bring in about \$250,000/year. Of that, \$50k/year goes to debt repayment and more than \$100,000 goes to external giving – close to the 50-50 allocation of resources that we decided on in 1976.

Tonight, the Stewards will consider using part of the Seekers share of the 2025 sale to pay off the remaining interest-bearing loans for this building. After that, the remaining amount at 0% interest will be paid off in five years if we continue our current pattern of repayment. That will leave Seekers more than \$300,000 to offer significant support for some current ministry or to create something new together.

This unprecedented gift could corrupt us all or turn us into lazy givers. I remember Mark Twain’s story of “The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg” as an example of how money can sabotage a community and undermine perfectly nice people. But I can also imagine that this corpus of money, which we did not earn and which comes to us as a free gift from earlier saints at Church of the Saviour, could also be an invitation to creativity and transformation.

Making Saints

Which brings me to the Gospel reading assigned for today in the lectionary. It is Luke's version of the Beatitudes:

Jesus said,

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled..

Then Luke follows that list of blessings with an opposite set of woes:

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

If we are rejoicing over the legacy from the sale of 2025, this litany of rewards and punishments suggests we will pay for our gladness with later deprivation. It is a worldly warning about the transience of all things and the promise of a cosmic balance to resolve the world's injustice. Actually, it sounds like something my grandmother might have said in slightly different words: "Don't think this will last forever."

But then Jesus jumps to a deeply challenging spiritual principle:

But I say to you that listen, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

That sounds like something the Dalai Lama might say today about practicing compassion. "Don't get stuck on rewards and punishments. Breathe in love. Breathe out compassion." That's exactly what Jesus was saying to those who had ears to hear!

As I mulled over this whole teaching, I began to see the litany of blessing and woe in a new light. Maybe he's saying that in this world, saints are shaped by experiencing plenty AND want, sorrow AND joy. It dawned on me that the saints we are celebrating today were probably NOT exceptionally nice people. Instead, I suspect they were exceptionally REAL people, able to be present to the whole range of human experience – of hunger AND fullness, of grief AND laughter –in the same way that Jesus was.

I also suspect that they were people who could move beyond petty differences, to sacrifice for their enemies sometimes, to turn the other cheek instead of plotting revenge, and go the extra mile when that was needed. – that they were indeed saints in a more traditional sense. As individuals like these saints, we all have that inner work to do – to grow beyond our ego needs for equality and retribution toward a steady state of compassion and forgiveness.

But there is a community component as well. It seems important that Jesus gave this teaching to his disciples, a company of

people already committed to following this new way of being in the world. They were to learn compassion for all beings. The disciples had already left the narrow confines of family and tribe, following Jesus into unexpected places – eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, healing the sick and feeding the hungry. They were learning to care about people they had been taught to hate and avoid. Those lessons are easier to learn in the company of others who have the same intention and a willingness to be changed.

Today, we have that same invitation. As individuals, we're invited to experience hunger and thirst, to feel the emptiness and grief of loss in our lives – and let that deepen our spiritual lives toward loving our enemies, giving sacrificially and going the extra mile when love asks it of us. As a community, we're invited to go the extra mile and extend love to every creature. Blessings and woes will come to us too, as part of the inward and outward journey we have chosen together as Seekers. We have experienced grief and anger as a community, particularly in the early days, when we felt shut out of the inner circle on Columbia Road, and later, when our offer of stewardship for 2025 was rejected. But now we find ourselves in a different place, strengthened by facing our own times of need and vulnerability, able to embrace the unknown future with hopefulness and curiosity about what God is calling us to be and do in the world.

I hope that many of us will choose to join the memorial service for Wellspring Mission Group on November 21, both to celebrate the importance of Wellspring in our own story and thank those who have been so faithful to their call for so long.

And I pray that God will stir us deeply as we consider what to do with the large financial gift that other saints left on our doorstep this week.

Amen.