

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 6, 2011
1 John 3:1-3

“...saints below and saints above...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I have with me a photo of my partner Michael Klare and me taken on August 6, 1986—we are outside Las Vegas standing in the Nevada desert at the perimeter of the Nevada Test Site. We are smiling, which is our attempt to mask our nervousness and fear. It is “Hiroshima Day,” the day many activists mark and protest our country dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima at the end of World War II. Michael and I are about to join dozens of other protesters and walk, in waves, onto the Nevada Test Site, to protest the building, testing and storing of nuclear weapons. We will, moments after this photograph is taken, walk with our “affinity group” onto the Test Site, kneel and pray, and be handcuffed and taken to jail. In the spirit of Gandhi and King, we are engaging in civil disobedience as a form of nonviolent, religious protest.

I still cannot believe that we are smiling so broadly in this photo. We were scared. After the photograph was taken, we crossed the line, walked onto the Test Site, knelt and prayed. The police, already there and waiting, came forward, read us our rights, handcuffed us, separated the men and the women, put us in police vans, and drove us around the state to some jail that still had room for new inmates. (Somewhere in there we appeared before a judge and pleaded **guilty**—not to the charge of “trespassing and disturbing the peace” but to “creating the peace.”) I was taken with 14 other women to jail in Tonopah, Nevada and locked up for a week.

The first morning of our incarceration the warden came to our cells and told us we had to “work” (do community service) during our week in jail. He said we had four choices:

1. Work in the prison kitchen helping make meals for inmates;
2. Go to the Tonopah animal shelter and clean cages;
3. Wash, wax and vacuum all Tonopah police cars and town vehicles;
4. Weed the Tonopah town graveyard.

You can probably imagine which of the choices I picked...weed the graveyard (I thought if I worked in the kitchen I would end of poisoning everyone in the jail and then I would be sentenced to life in prison).

Seven of the women chose *weeding the graveyard* and we were taken to the town cemetery. A solemn looking police officer named Jerry (Something), stony-faced and wearing reflector sunglasses, was put in charge of supervising us. He told us to get busy. Jerry sat on the hood of his cruiser with a big gun across his lap. He said we could drink water out of the hose that was lying there and that lunch would be delivered at noon.

We were all women of faith, one of us was a nun, and so before we started weeding the graveyard, we gathered in a circle, took hands, blessed the souls buried in the cemetery, thanked God for their lives and their spirits, blessed the land, and we thanked God for Jerry. Jerry said nothing and did not move.

We set out to “weed” the graveyard which, in the Nevada desert, is a dry and sandy patch of land with sagebrush growing where it should not grow. Weeding the graveyard consisted of several of us together pulling with all our might on one huge sagebrush bush after another. We drank from the hose, sang peace songs, pulled on the sagebrush bushes, fell over, laughed hard, sprayed each other with the hose, sang more peace songs and generally had a lovely time. When the bologna sandwiches, Kool-Aid and potato chips arrived for lunch, we formed our circle again, thanked God for the food, blessed our meal, ate slowly and relished each bite. We asked Jerry to join our circle. He refused.

The next day at the cemetery we did the same thing...prayed over the land, pulled out sagebrush buses, sang peace songs, blessed our bologna sandwiches, laughed, sang some more peace songs and had a lovely time. Jerry sat on the hood of his cruiser with this gun.

But on day three, Jerry removed his reflector sunglasses, and when we invited him to join our circle for lunch, he left the hood of the cruiser and came over. We were all sitting on the sand, Jerry sort of squatted. He asked us our names, where we were from, and why we had gone onto the Test Site. We told him: Stella from Oakland, Polly from Salt Lake, Marge from Austin, Andrea from Northampton, and so on—and that we were nonviolent activists who protested war, the preparation for war, building weapons of mass destruction, and killing in all forms. Jerry listened.

The next day Jerry left his gun in the car and after our initial morning circle he joined the group and asked more questions. We sat and talked to him for quite a while, and started pulling up sagebrush bushes much later than we should have.

The next day Jerry joined the opening morning circle. He did not take our hands but he stood there in the circle while we prayed and sang and then we talked with him more about our lives, our faith, and why we had done what we had done. Mid-morning when we were all boiling hot in the August sun, someone sprayed Jerry to cool him off. He laughed.

The final day of our incarceration came. We went to the graveyard that morning with Jerry like usual. We all knew we would be released that night at one minute past midnight (they kick you out of jail just after midnight so they won't have to serve you breakfast). We knew it was our last day at the graveyard, our last day with Jerry.

After our morning circle and prayers, Jerry said: "Will you gals promise to stay right here and not run away? I have to go somewhere." We promised...we told Jerry that we would no matter what still be there pulling sagebrush bushes when he returned from wherever he had to go. Jerry left us there—no fence, no cruiser, no gun, no guard, no nothing. He just drove off.

Jerry came back an hour later with a red pick-up truck behind him. He got out of the cruiser and then Jerry's wife and two children ages 7 and 9 climbed out of the truck. We came over to the truck and Jerry introduced his wife and children to us. Then he said to them, "These are the women I have been telling you about."

We made a circle, everyone sat on the sand. We went around the circle and said our names and where we were from. Then the children went back to the truck, brought out grocery bags, and went around the circle, from person to person, handing each one of us a Coke and a Milky Way candy bar. We blessed the Coke and the Milky Ways and we ate together. Then we told Jerry's kids about what we had done and why we were in jail. And we told them that we loved their father.

After maybe 45 minutes, Jerry said his wife and kids had to leave. We stood in a circle, sang a couple of our peace songs and said a prayer of thanksgiving. Jerry's wife and children left; he stayed with us at the graveyard. "Saint Jerry" we whispered to the other women when we returned at dinnertime to the jail and told them the story. Saint Jerry we called him.

Today on All Saints Day we pause and wonder: who are the saints?
Saints are ORDINARY people made holy when they open to the spirit of God and let God flow through them.

God works with ordinary people like Jerry, and like you and me, and makes us open, vulnerable, trusting, kind and soft. God makes us holy. God works in and through ordinary people to make us saintly. When we let God move through us, work with us, and use us fully, we have saintly moments in the middle of our ordinary lives.

Jerry let himself be vulnerable and open. Everything he had learned as a cop, all his training and preparation had taught him to make boundaries, keep a distance, value separation, follow protocol, and maintain a wall between him and inmates. But I believe God touched Jerry's heart, and that spark of the divine within him allowed him to become soft and open. God worked with Jerry and through Jerry to allow Jerry to be weak, trusting, powerless and affectionate. Jerry had a saintly moment—it was, I believe, God's doing and it was God shining through.

In his book Wishful Thinking, theologian Frederick Buechner writes:
“In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.”

God dropped a handkerchief called Jerry. And God moved in and through Jerry so that Jerry had a God moment, a saint moment that was purely divine. And God drops handkerchiefs all the time called Norma and Kathleen, Susan and Alice, Annie and Ross, Paula and Paul.

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and undefended, when our inner channel is open and clear, when we sense the movement of the Spirit within us and we respond, we have saintly moments and those moments are divine.

Maybe Mother Theresa can be saintly 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Most of us cannot and that is okay. We have saintly moments when God is moving in us and through us and we act on God's behalf, we act as God would act—we are the handkerchiefs God has dropped as God flirts with the world.

We are ordinary extraordinary beings. We are, as our Scripture reading for today tells us with certainty, “children of God.”

“See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God...”

And later in the reading: “Beloved, we are God's children...”

Well, as the saying goes, the apple does not fall far from the tree. We are like our parent God. We have the spark, the ember of divinity within us. We are born with the possibility of saintliness inside us. We are ordinary *extraordinary* beings.

God takes ordinary people, like Jerry, like all of us, and fans the ember of holiness inside us and the wisdom, compassion, generosity, expansive heart, and courage inside us swells and overflows and makes us saints.

And God takes ordinary food and makes it holy—ordinary food like bread and juice, and God fills them with the spirit of the divine so that we take God's holiness right into our own bodies.

God uses what God has to make the ordinary, extraordinary. God makes Cokes and Milky Way bars holy so that we can share a sacred moment with children. When Jerry's wife and kids drove off in the red pick-up truck, we said to Jerry, "You know we just shared Communion with your family." Jerry was quiet. He stared at us. After a while he said, "I guess so."

God uses what God has.

God uses us, flawed and tired, impatient and sinful, fearful and petty, God uses us...God fans that flame of the divine within us, God fills us with grace, beauty, strength and an enormous heart. God works in us and with us and we have saintly moments when we are Spirit-filled, overflowing with love, and God-like.

Earlier in our service we sang the hymn "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" and we sang this line together: "Glory to God and praise and love be ever, ever given, by saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven."

We know there are saints above—beloved members of this church who have been gathered to God, beloved members of our families who have been gathered to God, those who have crossed the bar and gone before who send us signs and wonders and whose spirits live within us.

And there are saints below—like Jerry and like all of you. Saints below who open their hearts and lives to God and let God work in and through them.

We are the saints below. Our acts of compassion and generosity, our presence when people are facing trials, our care of children, our love of the planet, our work for peace, our seeking justice, all these are God-like acts, God-filled work, when the divine spirit is working in us and we have saint-like moments.

“Glory to God and praise and love be ever, ever given,
by saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven,” you sang with gusto.

We are the saints below, the church in earth.

We are God’s hands and feet in this beautiful and broken world.

God flirts with the world and sometimes drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs, called Jerry or Ellie, Ruth or Richard, Beth or Cora act in saint-like ways that surprise even them.

God uses what God has.

God makes the ordinary, extraordinary.

God takes a Coke and a Milky Way and makes them holy—elements suitable for the sacrament of Communion.

Thanks be to God. And praise be to God...

from saints below and saints above.

Amen.

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