



## What Faith Looks Like on the Ground

*Using the Sanctoral Cycle*

by Amy McCreath



The theology and practice of mentoring was on my mind last summer while on sabbatical from my work as a campus minister. I spent time remembering people who had mentored me as a college student and young adult. Some mentors were people whom I knew. But some were people I never met, but rather studied: Trevor Huddleston, Dag Hammarskjöld, Simone Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu. As a politics major not quite yet clear about my calling, I was fascinated by the way these people lived into the interstices of the sacred and the political. I quoted them; I studied photos of them in textbooks and newspaper clippings; I drew courage from them. I was in conversation with them in my soul.

So I was intrigued when Reid Hamilton, the Episcopal Chaplain at [Canterbury House in Ann Arbor](#), serving the University of Michigan, told me that his community uses a sanctoral cycle for the weekly Eucharist. With permission from the bishop, and making room for major feasts and a full celebration of Holy Week, he regularly holds before students the lives of the saints. Through this practice, Reid hopes to help students see what faith looks like on the ground; to show them how actual people lived holy, courageous lives; and to reveal potential mentors.

Reid, Canterbury Music Director Stephen Rush, and the student leaders

together determine which saint to celebrate, choosing from the preceding week in the liturgical calendar. They use the appointed readings from the *Book of Common Prayer* or *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (LFF), usually adding a non-scriptural reading from the saint's writing or in keeping with the theme of the saint's life. Sources vary tremendously, from [The Life of St. Macrina](#) to [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report](#). The hagiography from LFF is printed in the service leaflet so that worshippers can read it during the extended period of meditation that precedes the service.

Reid points out that few college students know much church history; encountering the saints gives them a chance to learn some of it. Having grown up in the 1990s, when the Christians who made the news most often were espousing rather narrow values or working for strategic political gains, they have not heard much about heroes of the Church from earlier eras, and who worked for justice, freedom and peace. (For example, it became clear to me this fall that most of the students in our ministry at MIT did not know who Desmond Tutu was – a wake up call about my assumptions!).

Today's college students usually have seen Christianity presented as a set of propositions to which one adheres or not. Jesus' life in this model is held up as something you simply choose. In the last few decades the idea of faith as a way of life – an ongoing journey shaping daily decisions and patterns of

encounter, rather than as a decision made at a moment in time – has been obscured. Reflecting on the lives of real people who made real decisions – often courageous, sometimes imperfect; who had sometimes honorable, sometimes messy relationships – gives this generation an answer to the question that they yearn to answer: so what does faith *look like*? What should I *do*, today and long-term? Can I be imperfect – as I know I am – and still serve Christ?

Reid reports that sometimes it is easy to relate a saint's life to the lives of the students: [Thomas Aquinas](#), [Robert Grossteste](#) and other scholars provide a chance for reflection on the meaning and purpose of study, for example. Sometimes, doing this is rather hard: [Wolfstan of Worcester](#) – where do you take this story? But the connections are usually there, and gifts come from the struggle to find them.

In an era when myriad options for identity and meaning present themselves to a frenetically information-seeking generation, holding out examples of people who rooted themselves in God through Christ and lived into that faith is particularly important.

Reid notes that he enjoys helping the students see how certain saints' lives were like theirs in interesting ways: [Daniel Oakerhater](#), an outsider to the faith by birth, eventually claiming ground as a creative, effective leader and teacher; [Jonathan Myrick Daniels](#), a young adult going to Alabama to revive

its soul through justice-work, just as many young adults are undertaking to do in the post-Katrina South these days.

In *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, James Fowler notes that the "generation of virtues" is part of how the Christian community forms people for vocation. We show people "how love acts." These stories and the chance to discuss them are tools for doing this with young people who are at a critical stage in discerning their vocations.

Reid believes the impact is evident in student's lives, including two former U of M students now in the ordination process, and a student who has spent the last two summers in the US/Mexican border desert, rescuing people from dying in their attempt to cross into the United States.

After talking with Reid and reflecting on this practice, I am not ready to adopt it whole-cloth at MIT. But it did make me wonder whether we ought to do more with the great resource that is LFF. It made me wonder how we might honor several saints in the course of the academic year in ways that are meaningful and helpful to students. I wonder how else parishes and chaplaincies mentor students and others, not only through building relationships with parishioners, faculty, staff, but also through pointing to those far away.

Many parishes use LFF mid-week. I wonder how often it is done in a rote or unthinking way, and how worship leaders who are pressed for time might still think creatively about how to bring the saint's lives to people. Please be in touch to share your thoughts.

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**Reid Hamilton** and **Steve Rush** are now writing a book for Church Publishing, tentatively titled *Better Get It in Your Soul: What Liturgists Can Learn from Jazz*.

# "I Am So Happy Now"

## *The Gift of Living Out on Earth the Kingdom of God*

Sermon on the Feast of Constance and Her Companions at Canterbury House, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor on September 9, 2007

by Rebecca Wolf



I will describe to you two stories. Two scenes. If you can at all help it, don't distance yourself. Imagine them and let them in.

Memphis. 1878. A city of 47,000. It was the city of the plague. A description of the fever by Dr. Pease of the *New York Tribune*:

*Yellow fever is here. The wealthy, some 27,000, have almost all departed, leaving the poor to shift as they may for themselves, and to the horrors of the plague are added those of a condition approaching to famine. The provision stores are all closed, and the only way to obtain supplies from them is to break them open, which is sometimes done. All the drug stores except three are closed, and it is difficult to get medicine, even when medical attendance has been had and prescriptions written.*

And from Sister Constance herself:

*Yesterday I found two young girls, who had spent two days in a two-room cottage with the unburied bodies of their parents, their uncle in the utmost suffering and delirium, and no one near them but a rough negro drayman who held the sick man in his bed. It was twenty-four hours before I could get those two fearful corpses buried, and then I had to send for a police officer to the Board of Health, before any undertaker would enter that room. One grows perfectly hardened to these things – carts, with eight or nine corpses in rough boxes, are ordinary sights. I saw a nurse stop one today and ask for a certain man's residence – the negro driver just pointed over his shoulder with his whip at the heap of coffins behind him and answered, 'I've got him here in his coffin.'*

When the epidemic broke out Constance and Thekla weren't even there. They had just finished a year of teaching at St. Mary's School for Girls, and were taking a much-needed summer vacation and rest at the Motherhouse on the Hudson; they were away and they were safe. Moreover, they were not nurses but teachers. In short, they could have chosen not to return to Memphis, and they had plenty of reasons to avoid the city until the epidemic was done and then return for a long life in their old professions.

But they heard the news and left that night.

Yellow fever is an illness that can be survivable if a person has decent nursing and care, but most of the sick in Memphis did not. So the community nursed day and night, even after the nurses proper had given up; they refused to sleep outside the city, where it would have been safer, so they could continue to work at all hours; the reports were that they seemed animated by a common indefatigable spirit.

The community of religious and clergy who tended to the sick in Memphis were: Constance, Thekla, Hughetta, and Frances, Episcopal nuns and teachers at St. Mary's School for Girls; Margaret, who lived with the Sisters; George and Charles, Episcopal clergy; Ruth, Helen, and Clare, nuns and volunteers from New York and England; and Louis and William, clergy from outside. One by one they caught fever and died; only Clare, Hughetta, and William survived.

That is the feast we are here to celebrate today.

Let me bring you to a scene a little less dramatic, but very real and happening today. Four to six hundred migrants per day exit buses with tinted windows and walk 300 yards from Nogales, Arizona to Nogales, Sonora. They have spent between zero and ten days trying to cross a 110-degree desert with nothing but a change of clothes, a little bit of food, and a little bit of water; but they were caught by the Border Patrol and their attempt has failed. Nearly all arrive dehydrated; some are heatstruck; all have the glazed eyes caused by years of poverty and days of pain. Some report abuse by the Border Patrol. None report

having received medical care for the blisters on their feet, blisters so bad they can't walk, blisters as big as your fist.

It was my first day back in Nogales, Mexico, after a prior summer's work and a year's absence. About twenty people from the last busload of deportees were sitting around, waiting.

There was a little girl running around in the dust. Maybe five. She had a little white plastic toothbrush someone gave her. Her eyes were wide and bright; she was obviously intelligent. But that dead look of everyone else here, the vacant stare caused by years of poverty and days of pain, was already starting to seep in.

I asked myself, if she were, if she could be, if she could have been Mozart or Hemingway or Coltrane, how would we know?

I started crying. And I still can't stop.

The suffering of the world is real and it is awful. And as Christians we have to let it in. The Gospel tells us that those who love their life lose it, but that those who die to their lives save them. I don't presume to know what this means, and even if I did I couldn't explain it in words. The best I can do is tell you my story; whether that has something to do with this Gospel, only you can judge.

My story is, I didn't want this career. I didn't want to do this, at least not in the conventional sense of wanting. Mexico was not my plan. My plan was to be a clarinetist the way I had been for the previous eight years, to have my own separate life in my own separate subculture in my own small part of the world. But I knew it wasn't the right plan, knew it wasn't God's plan.

But, I told myself, Nogales seemed too hard; there was too much risk and too much pain. There were the obvious risks and sacrifices -- that 110-degree heat in mid-afternoon is not conducive to comfort, and that working in a border town whose economic base is organized crime is a bit riskier than an office job. But those weren't the reasons for my recalcitrance.

The reason was the risk and the pain in the heart. Social justice isn't a performance you prepare for and leave. It's not a 9-5 job where you wear a mask for a while and go home. And in the field there's no psychological anesthesia available. There's no space to hide out for a few hours when it's just gotten to be too much. There's no Internet to play with, no TV to watch at the

end of a bad night. Everyone with whom I was living and working would know me, know me completely, at my best and my worst hours; all of my faults and failures would stand out in broad daylight and there would be no way to escape being accountable for them. And if I did the work well, the reward would be living in suffering that I could not end.

But finally I couldn't get up in the morning. Finally I couldn't survive knowing they were there and needed me and I was here ignoring them. So I wrote some grants, blew off my parents, sold my car, and got on a plane.

The Gospel tells us that "Father, save me from this hour" is not what we should pray. God's not here to whitewash. He's not here to make the world of suffering miraculously OK so we can go back to our lives. The truth is that we have to live with it. Live with the suffering of someone else.

The Mexican volunteer in Nogales taught me the word *acompañar*: "to accompany" -- to do nothing but be with someone. One day at the port there was no bread. Either lack of funds or lack of infrastructure or intra-organization bickering -- there was no bread. So we asked, "Should we leave? There's nothing here for us to do!" Isabel, a Mexican deportee-turned-aid-worker, answered, "Why do you work so much? We don't care what you do. We just want you to be here."

There was no "fix"; hundreds of deportees would continue to come through; the problems were in the short- and medium-terms unfixable. But for people to come, understand what was going on, and stay with them through it -- that's what they wanted more than anything else.

And it seems to me that that is what these readings are about: taking in the suffering of others and counting it as our own. And if we do that -- if we just understand, in our hearts and in our experience as well as in our heads -- the actions just follow. Constance and Margaret didn't work twelve hours per day because they should. They saw the suffering and it just happened. They could not do otherwise.

I can't tell you where the strength comes from to live with the suffering of others. I don't know. But I can say from my experience that if it is God's will, it does come. Even if we think we haven't got it.

Even when we ourselves are doing so badly that there cannot possibly be space in our hearts for another person, let alone the other side of the world...it does show up. It does show up. God gives us "consolation" so we can answer the suffering of the world.

But Paul's word "consolation" doesn't mean feeling better. It means having the strength to work through and even because of our affliction. And just because we know where we'll get food tomorrow does not mean there isn't affliction among us.

I can't promise that transcending our own afflictions to respond to the suffering of the world will make the world "better," because it won't. Migrants in the desert still suffer in the same numbers; the poor in Memphis still died. But I will promise that the community that responds to suffering -- whether it's a group of nuns, a campus ministry, or the people who happen to come together on the ground -- becomes a community living in the kingdom of God.

I can tell you stories about the tortillas that are passed around the circle to American and Mexican alike. I can tell you that, three days after my shoes were "redistributed" in Nogales, a \$200 check arrived in the mail. I can tell you about the friends who work twelve-hour days with joy, without ever counting the cost. I can tell you that a man from Phoenix, despite being relieved by immigration from his \$20-an-hour job and deported late at night to a country he was born in but knew almost nothing about, was laughing under the stars. I can tell you the extraordinary feeling of security I finally had from living with people whose only priority was caring for the needs of other human beings regardless of wealth or race or nationality.

And I can tell you Constance's words on her arrival in Memphis: "How could I ever have left you! I have been so unhappy, but I am so happy now." For a few short days they had the gift of living out on earth the Kingdom of God. And there is nothing so beautiful.

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