

AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE: ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Matthew 25:31-40

Micah 6:8

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Halloween has become a huge holiday in the United States, but it wasn't always that way. Halloween used to be significant for the day that came after it - All Saints Day, a day to honor those people who have gone before us, whose lives have inspired us for the good. All Saints isn't a tradition we keep in any regular way in this church, but we often take a few Sundays around this time of the year to think about the lives of people we admire. Today and for the next four Sundays we are going to talk about five individuals who lived their lives in extraordinary ways, guided by their Christian faith.

Beau and I have chosen five different individuals to profile, four men and one woman. We didn't choose them because they were perfect. We didn't choose them because we agree with everything they ever did or said. We didn't choose them because of their politics. Rather, we chose them because their lives were guided by their faith. We hope that these sermons will inspire you to think about your faith and your life in a new way.

When you hear the name "Roosevelt", you may think of wealth and privilege. But when you read Eleanor Roosevelt's biography, you realize that wealth and privilege is only part of her story. Her story is also one of a childhood marked by abuse, a father with a severe drinking problem, the early loss of both of her parents, and a painful ab-

sence of any tenderness or affirmation. The obstacles she overcame make her life's accomplishments that much more remarkable.

Eleanor Roosevelt was raised in the Episcopalian church. One of her teachers along the way, a French teacher, encouraged her to memorize scripture in French. She remembered some of those scripture passages, in French, her entire life. To her, though, religion was not about following all of the Episcopalian rules. Religion was broad and expansive. She saw value in many different religious traditions. What mattered to her is not what religion one belonged to but how one practiced that faith. How does your religion impact your worldview? How does it affect how you treat people who are marginalized, powerless and poor? Spirituality not only inspired her; she saw how valuable it could be to people in need. Spirituality, to Eleanor, was "that feeling of having something outside of one's self and greater than one's self to depend on." She wrote, during the Depression and World War II, "There never has been a time when that feeling is more needed than it is today. People in trouble need just what little children need - a sense of security, a sense of something greater than their own powers to turn to and depend on."

As a young woman, despite what her biographer called "a childhood from hell", Eleanor cultivated a faith grounded in Jesus' call to care for "the least of these", nurtured by regular prayer and bible reading.

When she became First Lady, her work linked her core practices of religion with active care for people in need, both at home and abroad. Her life's desire, her purpose, was to make life better for as many people as possible. That purpose was more spiritually driven than politically motivated.

If you know anything about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt's marriage, you probably know that it was less than ideal. They suffered the loss of a child, and then she discovered his infidelity which reminded her of the pain of her childhood. Eventually they both found comfort in other relationships while remaining married. And, of course, his polio was a presence in their marriage, too.

But, as First Lady, in that longest of all American presidencies, Eleanor Roosevelt came into her own. She was determined to live into her life's purpose and calling. Many Americans were suffering during the Depression, and so she refused to serve fancy dinners at the White House. Once World War II began, she put the White House on food rationing. She regularly walked the streets of Washington DC, especially the poor neighborhoods. If she saw a soldier on the street, she would invite him to the White House for dinner. She traveled the country to see how the Depression was affecting common people, and she got to know them, not as statistics but as individuals. She convinced her husband that the answer to the suffering of the unemployed was not the dole but rather dignity-conferring jobs.

On one trip into Appalachia, Eleanor encountered child after child who looked malnourished. She understood the long-term consequences of hunger and poverty on the minds and the souls of children. She said, "How could these children - our children, God's children - survive childhood to become productive adults?"

During the Christmas season, her heart turned to Washington's neediest residents - some living close to the White House. On Christmas Eves, she would slip away from family and White House festivities - even one year when Winston Churchill was a

guest - and she would drive slowly through the alleys of the capital's slums, delivering Christmas trees, leading carol singing, and passing out small presents.

Her faith led her to believe that all people were equal in God's sight. She became appalled at the treatment of people of color. One November day in 1938, rumor had it that the First Lady was going to appear in Birmingham, Alabama at the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Police cars were on alert. The Commissioner of Public Safety, Bull Connor boasted that he would show her who was boss; Birmingham was his town. As the program began, some feared she had not come, to avoid a confrontation.

Suddenly a rumble swept the auditorium. There she was! Her smile drew more cheers. Acknowledging the applause, she slowly made her way to the "white" seating section and chose a chair on the aisle. Disappointment whipped through the crowd. She had caved in. In 1938, rigid segregation was the law of the state of Alabama, the law interpreted by Bull Connor, who had announced that he would arrest any white person - even the First Lady - who even attempted to sit on the wrong side of the aisle.

Organizers had worked to prevent confrontation by marking paths on the floor so that speakers walking to and from the platform could avoid accidentally stepping into the wrong racial section.

Slowly the hubbub died down. The speaker resumed.

A few minutes passed. Then some delegates elbowed individuals sitting next to them and pointed to the aisle. Eleanor's chair had moved. Then over again. Eleanor continued scooting her chair a few inches at a time. By the end of the speaker's presentation, the First Lady sat in the middle of the aisle between the "white only" and

the “Negro only” sections. She had not broken Alabama law, yet she had infuriated Bull Connor. She had demonstrated that she would not be bullied by a racist Southern Police Chief nor be bound by racism.

It was her faith that nurtured her strength of character.

As an older woman, she called Attorney General Robert Kennedy to ask why Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed, and what he was going to do about it? She opened her checkbook to raise bail for King and his associates. She was compelled by her Christian values.

What drove her to challenge racist property owners so that singer Nat King Cole could buy the house he wanted in Hollywood and entertainer Harry Belafonte could get the apartment he wanted in New York City?

What made her visit World War II internment camps where Japanese-American citizens were held? She was formed by her deep appreciation for the words of Jesus. She wrapped her mind and soul around the teachings of Jesus.

A thousand or so years before Jesus, the Hebrew prophet Micah posed a timeless question, “What does the Lord require of you?” Micah’s answer was carved deeply on the walls of Eleanor’s consciousness: “to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.” She acted justly, loved mercy and walked humbly throughout her life; none of it was easy or convenient.

She once said, “I think anyone who really thinks about the life of Christ must of necessity be influenced by it. It has always seemed to me that if we ever succeeded in living up to the standards which God set for us we would eliminate much of the conflict in the world and we would certainly get along better in our communities.”

Her enthusiastic activism exhausted those around her, and probably made them feel a little guilty. A joke went around Washington in her day that said, “Dear God, please make Eleanor a little tired.”

But she kept going, long after the death of FDR and long after they left the White House. She kept speaking, fundraising, and getting to know people in need throughout her life. Her motivation to keep going was embodied in the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi who said, “Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace”, words she had framed on her bedroom wall. She would have agreed with a more modern writer who talks about prayer in this way: “If we thank God for the good that comes to us but do nothing to bring that same good to others, what is the use of prayer? An individual who learns to pray with the heart of God has no patience for injustice anywhere. They see with the prophet’s eye. They break down national boundaries. They transcend gender roles. They have no sense of color or caste, of wealthy or poor. They see only humanity in all its glory, all its pain.”

She carried this wartime prayer in her wallet until the day she died: “Dear Lord, lest I continue in my complacent ways, help me to remember that somewhere someone died for me today. And if there be war, help me to remember to ask, ‘Am I worth dying for?’”

Eleanor ended each day praying, “Save us from ourselves and show us a vision of a world made new.” Throughout her travels and conversations, she called attention to injustice and inhumane conditions that diminished beloved children of God. She concluded that she could not persuade others to be merciful unless she had seen conditions firsthand. In 1961, she wrote, “My interest or sympathy or indignation is not

aroused by an abstract cause but by the plight of a single person whom I have seen with my own eyes.”

To her, equality and economic opportunity were first spiritual issues.

After her death, the theologian Richard Niebuhr said, “She was a saint in both the classic and modern sense”...as an individual who tried to imitate Jesus, striving to practice the virtues to a heroic degree.

Call them saints or not, we are inspired by those people who, through God’s mercy, love and nudging, act saintly in moments of testing, injustice and deprivation. Eleanor’s spirituality influenced her daily schedule, commitments and the way she spent her money. Spirituality was the lens through which she saw the needs of the world and the needs of individuals.

I’ll close with her words: “I think we shall have fulfilled our mission well if, when our time comes to give up active work in the world, we can say we never saw a wrong without trying to right it; we never intentionally left unhappiness where a little effort would have turned it into happiness, and we were more critical of ourselves than we were of others.”

Eleanor Roosevelt cared about each person, the least of these, and treated each one as if he or she were Jesus.

Material for this sermon is from [Eleanor: A Spiritual Biography](#), by Harold Ivan Smith