

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Alright party people, I'm here to preach the Word to you one last time. And it seems so fitting that we wrap this time together up with a commemoration. And that's a jargon-y church word, so before we do anything else, we need to be on the same page about what commemoration are. We've talked before about how there's a sort of hierarchy to feast days in worship. At the top are the Principal festivals—these are days where we remember major events in the life of Jesus—Christmas, Easter, Holy Week, Ascension Sunday, etc. Next we have the “lesser festivals” these celebrate other events in Jesus' life or the lives of saints, or major occurrences in the church—the Presentation of our Lord at the Temple, Annunciation, feast day of every apostle (including Mary Magdalene), St Joseph, St Stephen, the Holy Cross, Reformation Sunday, a Feast of the Holy Innocents all fall in this category. And then below those are the commemoration.

I'm going to be clear here, we have *a lot* of commemoration. That's kind of the point. See because we believe when we are baptized, we join in to the body of Christ, the communion of saints—a diverse group of people throughout time and place. And all of these people are flawed, just like you and me. But some of these people the church decided to draw special attention to. Not because they were perfect, but because their lives point to how God's extraordinary grace works in ordinary people. And by reflecting on how God's grace was at work in them, we can be reminded of how God's grace is at work in us. By remembering God's work through these people throughout time and place of various occupations, and social positions we're reminded that God has never not even for a moment abandoned God's people, and that anyone can advance the work of the gospel in their day to day lives. There are 8 categories for commemorations: Martyrs, Theologians, Artists & Scientists (yes, the church decided those two should share a category!) Pastors & Bishops,

Missionaries, Renewers of the Church, Renewers of Society, and Saints. Today we commemorate Florence Nightingale and Clara Maass, two 19th century nurses whose work laid the foundation of modern nursing. And for that steadfast work, the ELCA recognizes them as Renewers of Society.

The Renewers of Society are the ones who contributed dramatically to the development and vitality of society. They are those who listened to Jesus' words like the ones we read today, and heard instructions. They heard blessed are you who are poor and set out to make changes for the way poor people were treated in their society. They heard blessed are you who weep for you will be comforted and started moving trying to fix the problems that were responsible for the weeping. They heard blessed are you who are hungry now for you will be filled and went I have to go feed people. And many of these Renewers of Society did this work at great personal risk—Martin Luther King Jr, and Harriet Tubman are all also Renewers of Society just to give you a sense of what kind of work that title can encompass. These are people who saw societal injustices, saw how people were suffering under the weight of it, recalled how deeply Jesus cared for the poor and oppressed, how he told us to go and do likewise, and then they had the holy audacity to say I'm going to fix it.

I want to be clear here, Florence Nightingale and Clara Maass never met in life, Florence was a high born British woman who to the disappointment of her family, became nurse, and while she traveled abroad for her nursing, much of this work was to provide support in the Crimean war in what was then the Ottoman Empire. Clara meanwhile was from a working-class family in New Jersey, and her work took her to the Philippines and would end in Cuba.

Florence has more name recognition than Clara, I'll admit that. But Florence lived to be 90 and throughout her lifetime she got to make major contributions to the sanitary reformation, started the first nursing school in London, and wrote numerous books and pamphlets on a wide variety of topics. Throughout her lifetime, she'd talk about how she felt called by God to this life of service. She felt strongly that genuine faith should

manifest in active care and love for other people. But it doesn't seem like she believed this in an "earning" your way to heaven way—she had quite a few things to say about nurses who were chiefly there to secure their own salvation in heaven, calling this motivation inferior to those who were there to provide the best possible care for humanitarian reasons. And while she probably didn't think her call was going to lead to such far reaching changes, her work really helped build the foundation for modern nursing as we know it today.

Clara's story is more heartbreaking. She volunteered as a contract nurse for the US Army and went to the Philippines to provide medical support during the Spanish-American war. While she did treat people with battle injuries, almost all the patients she treated had infectious diseases. She herself came down with bone-break fever, and was sent home. But they were in desperate need of nurses in Cuba, because Yellow Fever was getting *so bad*. Scientists at work there trying to figure out a cure, but didn't know of any animals that were susceptible to the disease, so they needed human test subjects. It was the first recorded time of informed consent in human experiments, all 19 of them who signed up understood they might die. Clara was the only woman to volunteer. She thought the experience would make her a better nurse, she'd be able to better know what her patients went through. The trials allowed the medical team to definitively conclude that yellow fever was caused by from infected mosquitos, not contact with contaminated objects as they'd previously thought. Clara came down with yellow fever from mosquitos twice over the course of five months. She willingly agreed to the second round because they weren't sure if a previous infection would provide immunity from future cases and her first case had been mild and she so desperately wanted to help with a cure. Clara died from that infection, at 25 years old. Her death did provide scientists with the information they'd been missing. The human trials were stopped, and they were able to work out a vaccine.

As I was learning about these two women who'd dedicated themselves to service, who felt so strongly that it was through their vocations that they could carry out their faith, and in this way proclaim God's love and mercy through their everyday lives. I couldn't help but think of how extremely relevant their contributions and stories are to our own lives during the

pandemic. Like Florence, we suddenly increased both sanitation practices and air flow. Like Clara we waited with baited breath for a cure—maybe you or someone you know even volunteered for vaccine trials. Perhaps, like so many others, you had someone in your house come down with Covid and put yourself at risk to go into their room and help tend to them. But mostly I thought about all the nurses and other medical staff I'd see at the hospital, donning multiple layers of PPE and, like Clara and Florence and *so many* other nurses throughout history, walking into rooms that they knew contained a deadly disease and tending to the patient who was suffering. And I think of how many medical professionals contracted covid and ultimately died.

Florence and Clara both had enough name recognition that the whole ELCA came together and agreed they had met the parameters needed for this title. But what about just a normal every day nurse who worked throughout the pandemic one of the local hospitals? The teachers in underfunded schools who spend time outside their working hours tutoring students because they believe in that kid, even if no one else does? The person who checks in on their elderly neighbors who live alone because the weather is bad or they haven't seen them in awhile? Social workers, crisis responders, foster parents, people who check in with unhoused folks? Don't their lives also point to how God's grace is at work through ordinary people? I would argue that these people (and so many others) are contributing dramatically to the development and vitality of society. What about them?

And that's kind of one of the drawbacks to this whole non-omnipotent existence we mortals find ourselves in isn't it? We are, necessarily, going to miss some of the people in our world who are doing extraordinary things for the work of the gospel, especially if they are operating from positions with very little privilege. We may end up being those people, working hard to change the world, even if it's only for handful of people, and we may never be remembered for it. That can be disheartening, putting in work, making sacrifices and no one notices.

But I keep coming back to Jesus' words today, speaking to the spirit of that tension. "If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive payment,

what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.” If you’re only trying to address injustice because you hope on some future day, someone presents incense at the altar in your memory, what credit is that to you? “Instead, love your enemies, do good, & lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” My hope for you all is that you all feel called to something in this life—that can be a vocation yes, volunteer work, a hobby you’re passionate about, a caretaking role, anything really—that if you haven’t already, you find something in this world that makes you go “yes, this is what I’ve been called to do.” And you find ways to take whatever that is, and use it to reflect God’s love and mercy to your neighbors. Statically speaking, you’re probably not going to get a commemoration out of it, but heaven’s going to celebrate you all the same. Amen.