

Commemoration of Florence Nightingale

Texts

[Isaiah 58:6-11](#)

[Luke 5:4-11](#)

We live Christian lives when we join Jesus in telling the truth about our world, and taking the part of our suffering neighbors. Today's Scripture passages provide a kind of mission statement for this work, as we gather around God's table to be united in his mission.

We live Christian lives when we approach the table as penitents - people who are always seeking to turn from sin and selfishness, and who turn toward one another and toward our hurting world. It's by turning and by a prayerful looking that we will learn the love and compassion of Jesus. In this process, we look for practical ways to share God's work: to break the yoke of the oppressed, to pour ourselves out for the hungry, and to satisfy the desire of the afflicted.

We follow Jesus by going and getting people. We join his work in rescuing others from sin and selfishness, just as Jesus continues to rescue us. We invite the people around us to share with us in the renewal of the creation that was begun when God raised Jesus from the grave.

Florence Nightingale is one of thousands of exemplars of this work. She was both a social activist and a mystic. You may know that she is the mother of modern nursing. When she came of age, nursing was the preserve of indigent widows, ex-cons, and retired sex workers. It wasn't scientific, and it wasn't respected. Nightingale came from a wealthy and well-respected family, so this work was considered well beneath her station, and a waste of a good woman. But Nightingale was a mystic. She was a person of prayer, and she allowed herself to be moved by suffering, because suffering moves the heart of God. In the late 19th century, she traveled to Crimea where the British and Russian empires made war with one another. She used her resources and reputation to

institute new sanitation measures, which we believe saved thousands of lives, and millions afterward, when she put her textbook on basic nursing care in British homes, and her reforms were taken up by the army at large.

We consider that Florence Nightingale is a holy one of God - a friend worth emulating. We follow her example - and that of Jesus - when we open ourselves up to be moved by suffering. We are in good company when we open ourselves up to human pain. Our God responds to human pain with compassion, and is enraged by human injustice. If we let ourselves be moved to action in the way Isaiah describes, we will be solicitous for souls, concerned for the hungry and the oppressed, and willing to sully our reputations.

If we walk in this way of costly discipleship, we will be looked down upon by the Powers That Be. Respectable people will cluck their tongues at us. They won't even oppose us at first; they'll just dismiss us. They'll say silly and wicked things. When we call police to accountability, they will blame the dead. When we denounce Nazis, they will insist that there's wrong on both sides. When we talk about our shared responsibility to make sure our people are fed, they'll blame the hungry. When we tell people about the love of God, and call them to lives of holiness, still others will tell us that our religion is esoteric and impractical. This is because people who benefit the most from the status quo will always believe that everyone is getting what they deserve, and it's best not to rock the boat.

But we in the church have always known this. We know that the God of Jesus Christ loves and converts sinners, because that's our story. So by all means, let's sully our reputations and waste our time and treasure on people who don't deserve it. Let's get shamed as fundamentalists or social justice warriors. Let's be the men and women who are always willing to share with someone else about Jesus, about the needs of his poor, about the plight of LGBT people, about Black Lives Matter, about the realities of health care reform, or environmental stewardship. Let's

be the men and women who are always looking to help someone take their next steps into the life of prayer. Let's be the weirdos who speak plainly about holiness. For this is the fast that the Lord chooses: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free.

Amen.

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