

John 6:51-58
Aug. 15, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the bread of life. Amen.

So, everyone has heard of Florence Nightingale, right?

The lady with the lamp. The master of sanitation. The mother of modern nursing. Yes?

But, how many of you have heard of Clara Maas?

Clara Maas was born in 1876, 56 years after Florence Nightingale, in East Orange, New Jersey. She's American! As opposed to Florence whose family was from England.

Clara's parents were German immigrants to the US and she was baptized in the Lutheran Church in which her family was very active. That's why, we in the ELCA, remember her along with Florence Nightingale on August 13 every year.

Clara Maas was the oldest of nine children and her family was very poor.

As you may recall, Florence Nightingale was from a very wealthy family, the younger of two daughters. Her parents were not happy with her when she decided to go into nursing instead of marrying a wealthy man; that is until the queen gave her a brooch, which is now known as the Nightingale Jewel, and \$250,000 in 1856 after the end of the Crimean War.

Although nursing was seen as a lower class occupation at the time, the 17 year old Florence told her family that her moral, active nature, required satisfaction, which would not be found in married life. She believed that she was called by God to go make a difference in the world, so off she went to study nursing at the Lutheran Hospital of Pastor Fliedner in Kaiserwerth, Germany.

Did you know about the strong Lutheran connection to nursing?

With her keen eye on sanitation, Florence fought the cholera outbreak in London and significantly reduced the spread of disease. From there she was called by the Secretary of War to go to Constantinople to look after the British soldiers there.

She gathered nurses from different denominations and off they went. Even though they were told the horrors they would find there, they were shocked by how bad it really was. But, that didn't deter her and her fellow nurses.

They got right to work, cleaned up the hospital from top to bottom, gave the patients a healthier diet, and even provided entertainment for them to stimulate their minds. With all of their hard work, they were able to reduce the hospital's death rate by two-thirds.

At 38, in 1858, two years after she left Crimea, Florence caught Crimean fever and became homebound. But, that didn't stop her from following her call to improve health care and alleviate patient suffering.

She continued in her ministry until the day she died on August 13, 1910.

Clara Maas, on the other hand, had a very different life.

Being one of nine children in a poor family, she was farmed out to a family who took her in as their nanny. She didn't make any money, but she was given room and board for her service.

At 17, she went to Trefz Training School for Nurses at the Newark German Hospital. She graduated at 19 and after serving as a private nurse she volunteered to be a nurse for the Army during the Spanish-American War.

In 1899, more soldiers died from yellow fever than from combat. At the time they weren't sure if it was from the filth of the cities or from mosquitos.

Dr. William Gorgas at the Havana Sanitarium in Cuba wanted to find out, so he decided to conduct an experiment and asked for volunteers.

Having worked with soldiers suffering from yellow fever, Clara Maas gladly volunteered for the experiment. She wanted to bring an end to the suffering of her patients.

In 1901, she was bitten by a mosquito that had also bitten a patient with yellow fever, and she caught the disease, but only a minor case. She quickly recovered from her infection, while two men who had also been bit died.

The doctor couldn't believe that she had yellow fever and survived, after the two men had died, so she volunteered to be bitten again. Her hope was that she was immune from the first bite, because her initial desire for participating in the experiment was to become immune through the infection and be able to better serve her patients who were suffering.

But, the second case was more virulent than the first and she died on August 24, 1901, at the age of 25. Nine years before Florence Nightingale.

Her death confirmed the doctor's theory that it was mosquitos that transmitted yellow fever. His experiment, however, caused great outrage and the Army outlawed the future use of people in their medical experiments.

In 1938, a vaccine was finally available for use in humans after scientists realized mice could catch yellow fever.

Today Clara is buried in the Fairmount Cemetery in Newark, NJ, and the former German Hospital she trained at, now located in Belleville, NJ, is named after her.

Clara was almost lost to obscurity, but the director of the hospital, after seeing her portrait on the wall, decided to investigate who Clara was.

When she found out, she wanted the world to know what a sacrifice Clara had made for the world.

Originally her grave was marked with a simple army marker. Today the plaque on her gravestone quotes John 15:13 – “greater love hath no man than this.”

Clara laid down her life so that others might live.

Florence and Clara both took to heart the old adage, “you are what you eat.” They became bread of life for the sake of the world. They became what they ingested at Holy Communion – Florence as an Anglican and Clara as a Lutheran.

As we will say in our Offering Prayer today – Make us to be what we receive here, your body for the life of the world.

And in our Prayer after Communion, we say - As you have nourished us in this meal, now strengthen us to love the world with your own life.

We are what we eat. In Holy Communion, we eat the bread of life and we become one with Christ. We become one in his death and resurrection. We become one in his mission to bring life to the world.

In eating the bread and drinking the wine at Communion, we become Christ’s body and blood in our world – his body crucified and his blood poured out.

When we leave this place, we are Christ’s body in the world for the sake of the world.

Clara and Florence followed the call to be Christ in the world by becoming nurses. In their calls, they were made complete by becoming who they ingested. By becoming one with the bread of life, they put love for others through immunization and proper sanitation their lives’ calls.

And so, we give thanks for them and for all people who are the bread of life in their own little corner of the world.

It doesn't mean that we have to literally die for someone or some cause, but that we have compassion – that we walk with those who are suffering - and do what we can to bring life into the situation – the bread of life – Christ himself.

Last week we also celebrated St. Clare of Assisi, Clara's namesake no doubt, who said – Love that cannot suffer is not worthy of the name.

Clara and Florence's passion was nursing. Passion, which comes from the Latin *pati*, means to suffer. That's why we call the crucifixion the Passion of Christ.

So, what is your passion? What do you love in Clare's understanding that love is related to suffering?

Go there. Christ is with you, literally inside of you, and you are not alone – you have companions who are compassionate.

In Holy Communion, we are what we eat, and through it we are strengthened for suffering love, which is our passion.

We are not alone. Christ is with us and in us.

We are what we eat – the bread of life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.