

For All the Saints  
A Liturgy by Carl Appelquist  
Judson Memorial Baptist Church  
October 31, 2010

Every time I have been asked to say a few words from this platform, going back nearly 50 years, I have taken the responsibility seriously. I have asked God to help me come up with something for you worth listening to, something of spiritual value. This time my prayer was especially fervent. I said, "God, on All Saints Sunday I'll be on the platform with Karla McGray, and you know what a terrific speaker she is. There are bound to be comparisons between us and she'll blow me away with her intelligence and her sparkling personality and her beauty; she'll hit a home run with that friendly Judson audience. She's a seminary graduate and ordained, and I'm just an amateur, and 83-year old geezer, still trying to understand what Jesus actually said and what that means to us today. When she hits a home run, please just help me get to first base, even if it's just a no-hit walk.

So Karla, I want you to do well this morning, but not too well.

Joking aside, this morning I want to share with you a few thoughts on the spirit and collective personality of Judson, on change and continuity, and because it's All Saints Sunday, out of many possible nominees, I will suggest three Judsonites from the past for sainthood.

A century ago, when people could not travel far to go to church and the "social Gospel" had ignited the modernist-fundamentalist split, Judson was created as a liberal and open fellowship by and for the people of this neighborhood. In his history of the first 75 years, Tom Balcom quoted a 1914 Minneapolis newspaper article about this new building with the headline, "Open Every Night the Rule in New Judson Church". From the beginning, the friendly people of Judson opened this building and their fellowship to anyone and everyone who wanted to come here for the religious experience, but also for social and recreational purposes. It was a neighborhood resource known as the "Community Church". When the cornerstone was laid that same year, the people gathered outside in what had recently been 40 acres of farm land and heard Rev. E. R. Pope, the leader of Minnesota Baptists, wisely observe that Judson's leading characteristics were "freedom of thought, democratic brotherliness, and high spiritual purpose", three essential qualities for a fellowship of liberal Christians.

Our first two ministers, Justin Nixon and Mark Sanborn, shared with the congregation from the beginning their Baptist views on authentic soul liberty, acceptance of religious diversity, the institutional separation of church and state, and social justice.

My first nominee for sainthood is Howard Vernon, remembered as a powerful preacher, who was Judson's third senior minister from 1923 to 1932. (During those years Betty Wedekind, Francis Nelson, and Verna Hesse were on the cradle roll and were Sunday school children.) I never had the privilege of meeting Howard Vernon but he has always been my favorite historical senior minister because his spirit of unconditional love and acceptance was demonstrated in his only question to prospective members, "Do you need this church?" He didn't demand that they take

any oaths, sign any man-made creedal statements, or bow to any ecclesiastical authorities. Just understand your need for this Christian fellowship.

During his 9-year pastorate, 645 new members joined the church and the sanctuary was expanded to its present configuration along with the fellowship hall and the kitchen below. Ruth Carlander's 1959 history of Judson states that some members thought Howard Vernon's views were too liberal and he resigned in 1932. But 9 years (the average at Judson) is a good long pastorate and, as a "preacher's kid", I can tell you that it takes significant congregational support for a minister to last that long. I like to believe that all those 645 new people benefited from his generous invitation and the open and supportive fellowship of Judson. From this platform 85 years ago, Howard Vernon set the stage for our "welcoming and affirming" convictions of today. He was way ahead of his time. If he were standing here this morning (and in a way, I feel he is), I would embrace him and say thank you, Howard, for your Christ-like love for all in those early years. So on this All Saints Sunday, I honor Howard Vernon as my first Judson saint.

The second honoree is someone I knew very well and so did many of you. Geneveve Johnston was not a wall-flower, not a silent potted plant in the corner. She was a bold, assertive, "take charge get things done" single female who functioned very well in a macho society long before ERA or the modern feminist movement. She told me once she was motivated early in life growing up as the only sister among many brothers. She became a Minneapolis public school teacher and then director of the Minneapolis Teachers' Retirement Fund. She was a trustee of Sioux Falls College and the Baptist Homes Society. She had a vivid personality and, when she walked into a room, we all knew Geneveve had arrived. When she presided at board meetings as president of the Minnesota American Baptists and some of us board members were joking and having too much fun, she would say, "Now if you boys will stop horsing around, we can get on with our work." She did all this with a smile on her face. I remember her congeniality, her exuberant personality, and her hearty laughter. She would phone me about some matter of mutual interest, and as soon as I said hello, she would start talking. She was a loud and fast talker, and before I could get a word in edgewise, she would finish what she had to say and hang up. She could be abrupt, but I wasn't offended because her zest for life was inspiring and contagious. For many years she was a positive influence in this church, in state and national Baptist affairs, in the City of Minneapolis, and in her professional community. Late in life she married widower Harry Corey from Judson who had been general manager of the Minneapolis City Auditorium. One day about 30 years ago, uncharacteristically without fanfare, Geneveve just sat down in a chair and died. I lost a friend – and so did Judson. But I remember Geneveve.

As we go through life we meet many people and it's usually just hello and a handshake. But once in a while, rarely, we meet a new person, we look into their eyes, exchange a few words, and immediately something clicks. That's what happened to me the first time I met Tom Swallen here at Judson. Fortunately for us, his sister Sydney Rice and Craig Wiester had become a part of our church family and they influenced Tom and Diane to join us. I sensed right away that Tom was a really good person, wise and gentle and kind and a man with a sense of humor. He was very modest and never said a word about his impressive achievements, but when I learned from others of his professional stature in the medical community, I was not at all surprised. Tom had been a pathologist and Chief of Staff at North Memorial Medical Center and a part-time assistant professor at the University Medical School. He gave many years of

volunteer service to disabled persons and prostate cancer survivors and was president of Minnesota ARC and Minnesota Homeward Bound. Tom was with us here at Judson for only the last few years of his life, but he made a fine contribution and a deep impression on all of us. Getting to know him on a one-to-one basis was a spiritual experience for me.

One day early in our friendship as we were saying good bye on their doorstep, he took my face in his two hands and moved in very close. The sudden intimacy surprised me and my first thought was, is he going to kiss me? Instead of a kiss, he suggested I see a dermatologist about the mole on my left cheek. That was Tom, the doctor, practicing his healing ministry. And I appreciated and followed the free professional advice.

He suffered himself with prostate cancer for 16 years and his courage, acceptance, and grace in this long and difficult final illness were a serene testimony to his belief in the beauty of this life and his faith in a loving God who would receive him with open arms. I let him know how much I respected him and appreciated his friendship. At his last art show with Sydney, we bought one of his nautical paintings to remember him. The many people who loved Tom from all over the community filled this sanctuary at his memorial service and spoke of his warm and loving personality and his lifetime of humble service, a beautiful tribute to Tom. When he was in his 70s, he reflected on aging, "Look back on your life; become acquainted with yourself. Forgive yourself and others. Realize that everyone is doing the best they can. (Except certain CEOs and politicians!)" To the end, he was philosophical and kept his sense of humor.

When he died I said to Diane and Sydney and Craig that I wished Tom and I had met many years before when we were both young so that we could have enjoyed a long lifetime of friendship, instead of just a few short years.

When the brass band plays and the saints go marching in, I know that Howard and Geneveve and Tom will be in that number.

These three unique individuals who made the world better were each from a different generation in history. As each generation flows into the next, there is change and challenge, transition and transformation, but also a continuing legacy, a spiritual and cultural continuity. Literally thousands of people have benefitted from their participation in this family fellowship since 1909, and that continues. It is an obvious law of life that all individuals, including you and me and all senior ministers, come and go, but the people survive and continue. Today we remember with gratitude all those we have known and loved in the past, but we live in the present, and with courage and hope we plan and work for the future.