

**The Life You Save (Summer Saints Series: Clara Louise Maass)**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 23, 2024**  
**Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16:24-28, NRSV)*

Some of you know that back when I was in college, I had a curious habit of taping little cards with quotes I liked around my room – John Lennon and U2 song lyrics ... poetry ... philosophical lines ... nerdy aphorisms. Those were strong spiritual-seeking days. I had stopped going to church just a few months in, but I was looking – looking for something I couldn't express and hadn't found yet.

Of all my cards, there was only *one* bible quotation – but one that remained up all the years I was there. It was *this* one – what we just read from the gospel of Matthew. I had been haunted by it my whole life. It haunted me in all my time as a student. And to this day, I am *still* haunted by it ... what it *means* to take up the cross.

It's a mystery that we'll spend all our lives discovering the depths of, but there's a plainness and directness about it too, that wouldn't have been lost on Jesus' original hearers: The life you would *save* ... the life you would clutch on to at all costs ... is the life you will *lose*. And the life you would *lose* ... the life you would share and give away in love ... is the life you *save*.

This is *not* the wisdom of the world. You will not find this wisdom in any secular bookstore's self-help section, and frankly, you would struggle mightily to find it in a *Christian* one. Many years ago, I worked in a "Christian" bookstore for a while, and while there, formed the distinct impression that God's purpose in existing is to make us happy and successful, and make all our dreams come true! We all know of so-called "prosperity gospel" preachers who have turned such a message into a very lucrative industry. Claiming to speak in Jesus' name, they say that if we just have enough faith, "name and claim" what we want, and diligently follow these seven or whatever Biblical Laws of Success, we can have the health, wealth, and prosperity of our dreams.

And of course, all this makes sense inside a culture driven by a compulsion for more and more. The reason you are unhappy is that you don't have *this*, or *this*... It's a message that's so *easy* to sell, but it is *not* the gospel. As southern writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course

it is the Cross.” The life you would save is the life you will lose. And the life you would lose is the life you save.

Our Summer Saint for today is a very obscure person of the past, an American nurse named Clara Louise Maass (1876-1901), the daughter of German immigrants. She is someone I certainly had never heard of, and I am deeply appreciative to Dori Allen for calling my attention to her. I suspect most of us have never heard of her, and yet in part *because* of her and her sacrifices, countless lives have been saved over the last 120 years from the scourge of a once-deadly disease that had claimed the lives of millions over the centuries. A woman of unsurpassed courage and conviction, she knew something about taking up the cross.

She was born in 1876 in East Orange, New Jersey, the daughter of German immigrants Robert and Hedwig Maass, and the oldest of ten children in an impoverished – and very devout Lutheran – family. Early in her teens, as she was in school, she also worked outside the home to help alleviate her family’s financial burdens, and soon discovered a special calling to service to the sick and the poor. She worked at the age of 15 at a home for Newark, New Jersey’s orphans, and then at 17 started nursing school, after being influenced by the example of Florence Nightingale.

In 1895 at the age of 19, she became one of Newark German Hospital’s first graduates from their training program for nurses, and by 1898, had been promoted to head nurse at the Hospital, where she was well-known for her hard work and dedication to her profession. Of course, 1898 was a fateful year for the United States in that it got involved in the Cuban struggle for independence from Spain and so fought what we know today as the Spanish-American War.

It takes guts to volunteer for service in *any* such conflict involving widespread human suffering, but young Clara volunteered as a contract nurse for the U.S. Army in April of that year. Between 1898 and 1899 she served with the 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army Corps in Jacksonville, Florida, Savannah Georgia, and Santiago, Cuba. She was discharged in 1899, but volunteered again to serve with the 8th U.S. Army corps in the Philippines from late 1899 to mid-1900.

Most of her work as an army nurse involved not battle injuries, but rather aid to soldiers suffering from infectious diseases like typhoid, malaria, and yellow fever which were rampant and deadly. She got sick herself while serving in Manila and was sent home. This would have been a perfectly respectable time to step away from such service for good and go back to Newark, to the love of her family, and serve in a hospital there where there was work to do and plenty enough suffering to relieve.

But young Clara had a different perspective rooted in what she had experienced. Those diseases I mentioned a moment ago really were rampant in those places she had been, among soldiers *and* ordinary people. And among *soldiers*, deaths from such diseases – particularly typhoid and yellow fever – far exceeded deaths on the battlefield or from battle wounds. And so, in October 1900, she returned to Cuba after answering a call for nurses put out by the eventually quite famous Dr. William Gorgas, who was working with the U.S. Army Yellow Fever Commission. The

Commission, headed by Major Walter Reed (someone else you've probably heard of), was established during the post-war occupation of Cuba in order to investigate yellow fever, which was endemic there. One of the commission's goals was to determine if the disease was spread through mosquito bites or by direct contact with sick people or contaminated objects.

Just as with our much more recent experience with mysterious diseases, there was so much that people, and that science, didn't know yet, leading to some risky studies and attempts at containing and preventing these sicknesses, some of which proved to be dead ends and others which would prove revelatory and revolutionary.

And this is where it gets a little ethically hairy: The Yellow Fever Commission recruited *human* subjects – not monkeys or lab rats – for their tests in the drive towards greater understanding and ultimate conquest of this costly, deadly disease. They did so for a simple and understandable reason – because they didn't know of any animals that could contract yellow fever, and so in the first recorded instance of informed consent in human experiments, volunteers were told that participation in the studies might indeed cause their deaths. As an incentive, volunteers were paid \$100 (in today's terms, approximately \$4000), with an additional \$100 (or \$4000) if the volunteer became sick.

In March 1901, Maass volunteered to be bitten by a particular kind of mosquito that had been allowed to bite on patients who already had yellow fever. Out of 19 volunteers, she was the *only woman* and the *only American*. By this time, the researchers were fairly certain that mosquitoes were the means of transmission, but lacked the scientific evidence to finally prove it because some volunteers who were bitten remained healthy. Maass continued to volunteer for experiments – in May, June, and finally, August – and would send her mother all the money she was given. Over those months, she came into contact with the yellow fever mosquitoes a total of seven times. After her first bite, she had become ill but had only showed minor symptoms; this led researchers to believe that she was not immune, so she remained eligible for testing.

It's fair to ask at this point, beyond idealizing and canonizing her so quickly as a saint and eventual martyr, what her motives were. (And yes, she would eventually die, in August, but more on that in a moment). Sensationalized newspaper headlines after her death portrayed her risky actions as the result of her family's financial dire straits, and a desperate need to help her mother ... One headline read "Sold Her Life for \$100," and others were similar. And honesty demands a recognition that her family's poverty can't simply be removed from this equation – or in any case, it surely contributed to an extra level of felt responsibility on her part to make life better for *all* in her orbit, both for her patients in Cuba and her loved ones back in the States.

But she also clearly believed that achieving immunity might still be possible (through getting sick but not dying), and so help her become even more effective in her nursing – both because she would be able to work without fear *and* because she would understand at a far deeper, empathetic level what her patients were going through. And so, on August 14, Maass allowed herself to be bitten by infected mosquitoes once again. Researchers were in fact hoping to show that her earlier, milder case of yellow fever *was* sufficient for immunity against the disease.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. Once again, she became sick. As her symptoms worsened, she knew that something was different this time, and she wrote her mother a goodbye letter. Clara Maass died ten days later, on August 24, 1901, at the age of 25, and was originally buried in the Colon Cemetery in Havana with U.S. military honors, though several months later, in February 1902, her body was moved back home to Newark.

Not surprisingly, her death aroused public anger, which put an end to yellow fever experiments on human beings. And yet, as problematic as such experiments were, it is also true that her sacrifice led to lightning swift developments which practically eliminated yellow fever in Havana within a year, and a few decades later led to the development of a yellow fever vaccine which has saved countless lives.

And these undeniable truths led to both Cuba (in 1951) and the United States (in 1976, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth) issuing postage stamps in her honor. And you remember that Newark German Hospital? Well, it was re-named in 1952 as the Clara Maass Memorial Hospital, known today as the Clara Maass Medical Center. It turns out that she is the first nurse ever so honored with a stamp or to have a hospital named for them. She is, in fact, even recognized in another way, appropriate for today here – honored on August 13 as a “Renewer of Society,” along with Florence Nightingale, on the Lutheran Church’s Calendar of Saints!

What a witness! But now, what do we *do* with such a life of service and sacrifice? How does Clara Maass become anything more for us than an unattainable example – one we safely admire from afar while we go on with silly dreams of God carefully planning the blueprint of our future success? And how do we escape the natural conclusion that somehow her early death was anything more than a singular tragedy, something to run from?

Oh, her death *was* a tragedy. That’s not the issue. But as we peer deeper into this life and this death, we might discover more too – a deeper mystery of discipleship coming into focus, a mystery into which we all are invited. We might slowly find ourselves waking up to see with crystal clarity what is true, what is real – and what is not.

As we look deeply into her life and death, other things beyond a singular tragedy come into focus: her generosity, her humility, her courage ... her willingness to surrender any small, private vision of her own in favor of a larger vision of God’s love and purposes for human beings. And when seen in this way, we see that she didn’t just give her life on one fateful, tragic day. *She had been giving her life away for years.* From working with the orphans of Newark, to serving the sick in a stateside hospital, to her risky efforts to alleviate suffering in one of the most dangerous places on earth at the time ... this sharing, this pouring out of herself for something greater than herself was who she was. This was Clara Maass.

Confronted with the light of a life freely shared, our own eyes may open more and more, and we may see a death that was not the abrupt *end* of a life, but rather, its seal, its confirmation, its perfection. And the phantoms of our own fears, of our own little patterns of self-protection and self-importance, begin to fade – a little more than before – in that daylight.

And that most of the things we spend so much time and energy on ... the cares and concerns and the images we seek to cultivate ... all the climbing, the controlling, the fearing ... all the strivings to make something of ourselves ... none of them matter. Only a life lived in love matters, and only a life shared, poured out, in love is a life worth living.

Jesus once said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” That saying had to have been hard for his first followers to hear, but as we know, these frightened, self-protective disciples *would* come to see – they would learn to live into the Light. Awakening to the meaning of their own beloved Master’s life and death, their true journeys would begin, and they would learn to see for themselves what was real – and what was not.

They would come to see that taking up one’s cross – once so scary, so threatening – was *not* a call to die, but a call to *live*! It was – and still is – a call to awaken from the slumber of what we have called a life ... to live and to love and share fully. To be all that we can be –

To the glory of God! Amen.