

River of Fire—Sister Helen Prejean

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Today I'm going to talk about a new book by Sister Helen Prejean called *River of Fire*. It is the story of her spiritual journey. You may have come across Sister Helen before because her first book was *Dead Man Walking*. It was turned into a movie starring Susan Sarandon and Tim Robbins. Susan Sarandon won the Academy Award for best actress in 1996 for playing Sister Helen. Over a billion people worldwide watched the awards that night and the book catapulted to the New York Times Best Seller list for 31 weeks. I will talk more about this later, but first let me begin at the beginning.

Sister Helen was born and raised in New Orleans. She grew up in a comfortable Catholic home. She lived in a large house in a white suburb with black help that used the bathroom in the garage. She went to a private Catholic girls' school. When she had graduated at 18 years of age, she entered a convent and worked to become a nun.

As a novitiate it was her job to learn to pray and to work. She writes that if a single motto were written about the doorway of the novitiate it would be "Enter here to die to self to be reborn in Christ." After two and a half years of training Sister Helen became an official nun. She donned the seventeenth-century widow's attire the nun's habit. From there Sister Helen was sent to college and she later became a middle school teacher in a Catholic School. Her life changed dramatically in 1962 with Vatican II. And from there her life got far more interesting.

Her hopes, dreams, philosophy, and theology are all intertwined with the story of her life. How she prayed, what her theology was, and her ideas of social justice all changed and evolved.

First this is what she had to say about prayer.

“Fire: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ...The world has not known Thee, but I have known thee.” These are the words of Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher, who turned to the image of fire to convey his encounter with the divine. This was the way Sister Helen wanted to pray: pray with fire. The fire is the mystic union, God’s pure gift. It is grace; you can’t achieve it by your own efforts.

She reports her mind jumped around. It takes a while to still her mind, which jumps around like popcorn with so many distractions. A nun’s life gave her chunks of time for prayer and spiritual studies. She found she needed the silence freed from empty chatter and trivial conversations which she claimed to excel at. She used her free time for retreats, spiritual reading and study and the company of spiritual seekers. Her hero is Thomas Merton, the cloistered Trappist monk, and his book *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton led an alcohol-sodden, pleasure-seeking life, but an intellectual life, too, that included years of study at Columbia. One day a mysterious power led him off the busy streets of New York into a Catholic church. When he knelt down in a pew, he felt his soul go quiet and a feeling of peace came over him. He didn’t know what the quiet meant but he knew his soul had been waiting for it. He sought to follow the peace it gave him. He had aspired to be a writer, but he gave that up, he thought, for a life of silence and prayer in strict separation from the world. But his abbot asked him to write and out of that came his memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain* which was published in 1948 and quickly became a best seller. It was all the rage when Sister Helen was in high school. She loved to read about his wild and lonely life in which he searched for and heard the call of God to be a monk.

As a novitiate Helen strived to know Jesus intimately. She read and was instructed on how the saints prayed—the steps they took, one by one, to find the fertile place where she could meet the living Christ and refashion her life. One important lesson was that you have to devote time to prayer whether you feel like praying or not. You have to commit yourself to times of prayer and present yourself before God faithfully even if, “you feel you’re wasting your time and you feel dry as a stick,”

From the lives of saints that died as martyrs, she determined that she did not want to be a martyr though she concluded that saints die well, Sister Helen decided there must be a way to be holy for cowardly people too. She then learned about the “little way” of St. Therese of Lisieux. No big heroics. What makes the “little way” is that you do very, very ordinary things, such as washing dishes or weeding the garden or doing the laundry with love for God. Therese thought that these insignificant acts, if done with great love, are as pleasing to God as history-changing heroic deeds. Thus, Sister Helen laid down the foundational principle of the spiritual life that guided her actions for many years.

But over the year’s things changed. She discovered that far from being equal in value, and in the face of critical suffering and injustice, refusal to act is immoral. She quotes Annie Dillard: “We diddle around, making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end...raising tomatoes when we should be...raising Cain or Lazarus.

Now when she goes to chapel for meditation it is for intimacy, the feeling of God’s presence close and sure. “I am with you, as God spoke to Moses and Abraham, and to the prophets and to Jesus.” Speaking and listening is the life-breath of prayer, especially the listening part. It takes steady spiritual practice to learn to get past anxiety-laden surface chatter into Deep Soul. St. Teresa of Avila called prayer “a conversation with Christ, who loves us” or “a conversation between friends.” Sister Helen states that she welcomed the safe, private space of the hour of silent meditation each day that was mandated.

Things changed dramatically after Vatican II in 1962. Nuns were allowed to have friends. They were allowed to talk openly about everything, and they did. There was major upheaval among rank and file Catholics. The mass was now in English, people were encouraged to study and read the Bible. They were never allowed to do that before. People had questions like why go to mass if you aren’t going to hell by skipping it? Why go to confession if you could talk to God directly and he would forgive you anyway? Nuns lost their widows garb. Heads and legs were now exposed. Sister Helen met with groups of people explaining the changes and encountered confusion and anger.

As part of the new freedom for nuns Sister Helen was sent to Notre Dame to study. Whereas nuns learned to pray the scriptures they never studied the scriptures. While priests were taught theology, nuns were not until Vatican II. What she learned was surprising in that one would expect a nun to know these things. She learned that the Gospels are faith testimonies, not historical accounts. You learn to become an amateur literary archeologist doing digs through textual layers to get to the human Jesus.

She already knew from personal experience that an ongoing encounter with Christ can transform the way you think and live your life. It is a slow process she says. But her image of Jesus was still gauzed over with pious images of him shining so brightly with divinity that she lost a sense of his humanness and found it hard to relate to him. She took a course on Mark the earliest Gospel closest to the time of Jesus written about 60 C.E. It is the freshest and most unvarnished of the Gospels and shows Jesus as truly human. He loses his temper at hypocritical religious authorities, weeping and terrified, pleading aloud and in silent tears to God to spare him from the terrible death coming down on him, hurt to the core when, on the night before his death, his closest friends desert him, and shunning attempts of people to attribute divine power to him. Mark is quick to notice Jesus' need to withdraw from hectic activities and pressing crowds to steal away into desert solitude. Sister Helen gets that. She needs to cordon off hunks of solitude to be attuned to the depth of her own soul and so she can attend to the inner voice that steers her life. She refers to Psalm 46, "Be still, and know that I am God." That is our scripture today.

Jesus was educated enough to be able to read from the scroll of Torah in the synagogue. But Jesus did not have religious credentials, he was not a priest. He was a member of the laity. Sister Helen says, "it plum knocks my religious socks off" to realize this. But Jesus taught with authority, and not as the Scribes and Pharisees. This must have been threatening and upsetting to the institutional religious authorities used to being revered by the people. Jesus was truly human, from childhood into adulthood Jesus must have evolved and matured in consciousness, personality and religious beliefs as well as his sense of vocation.

According to Sister Helen, one truth shines through the entire New Testament, that is the radical nonviolence of Jesus. His way of loving means that we must not seek revenge on those who hurt us but rather go further forgive our enemies. He teaches turning the other cheek. People like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King discovered a way to actively resist social injustice by harnessing a positive, nonviolent force, the way Jesus did.

Jesus never used the word savior to refer to himself. He instead invited people to leave behind half-dead loves to become “born again” into a vibrant life in union with the divine. So, what does savior mean? One thing is clear, says Sister Helen, Jesus did not save us by offering his life as a substitutionary sacrifice to appease God’s wrath. What kind of God would demand such a thing? Sister Helen does believe that Jesus is her savior. She has no doubt that she needs savings from her “self-centered, ego-driven, adulation seeking self.” She concludes that Jesus saves her in desiring her to learn things in a fresh way—what the Zen Buddhists call having a beginner’s mind. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he said that unless we become like little children the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven will remain closed to us.

In the tragic aftermath of Jesus’ terrifying and shameful crucifixion it was to the prophet Isaiah that the disciples of Jesus turned. The Gospel accounts of Jesus’s passion and death and resurrection are one extended meditation on the Hebrew scripture. Jesus’s followers were trying to make sense of the horrifying catastrophe. It is faith addressing inscrutable mysteries, turning to God, who receives and vindicates his faithful servants. “Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.” Read it with faith, and it can set your soul ablaze like flint striking rock. In the face of inscrutable mysteries such as death, it can provide the strength to abide in darkness, to breathe, to wait to hover until life and hope flow once again. Sister Helen adds that she has been praying the scriptures for years, but at Notre Dame to be able to learn the historical context and literary structure of biblical texts for the first time was soul satisfying in the extreme.

Things again shifted in Sister Helen’s life. She had been happy teaching in a white comfortable Catholic school, ignoring the world around her and all of its

problems. A rift developed among the sisters about social justice. Should they just be charitable among the people where they lived, or should they go out and try to help in the outer world? She fought against the voices that told her to go out into the world. Was it not her job to pray for but not to work in the world? Finally, another sister got the her. Sister Marie Augusta said, that integral to the good news is that the poor are to be poor no longer. What Jesus was telling them, is that far from accepting lives of oppression and misery as God's will, they have God's blessing to resist the injustices that make their lives wretched. Their very dignity as sons and daughters of God calls them to strive for what is rightfully theirs. Justice, not charity. Active struggle, not passive compliance. Sister Helen was stunned. She says, "How can I claim to be a follower of Jesus if I'm not aligned with poor people in their struggle for simple human dignity? Where have I been? Why have I been so resistant to the Gospel's call to work for justice?" Sister Helen moved to a church house in a housing project in New Orleans. There she met institutional racism. Banks redlined black people out of certain neighborhoods, racially inflected language was used where "whiteness" is associated with purity and "black" is sinister and bad. She learned about white privilege and the criminal justice system that was 90% white. She learned about the working poor and how a high school education would earn only a minimum-pay dead-end job. She learned about generational poverty. From a second-floor window she watched as a neighbor got in an argument with another man. The other man pulled out a gun and killed her next-door neighbor as she watched in horror. She said that she used to think prayer was about persuading God to intervene to correct things that were wrong with the world. Now she said I'm learning that real praying means taking on other people's suffering as her own and letting the experience rouse me to action. Prayer doesn't change God; it changes us. It jolts us awake to pain and suffering caused by injustice that won't leave us in peace until we do something about it. In 1982 she was asked to become a pen pal to a death row inmate. She said, "sure." This is where this book leaves off and her book *Dead Man Walking* begins.

River of Fire is a delightful book. I have talked about some of her ideas in the book and these ideas are imbedded in her life story. The book is interesting in

telling the story of how nuns live and about Catholicism in the late 20th century. But Sister Helen also tells the story of her family, her childhood her long-term friendship with Chris another nun who eventually becomes a doctor. She also shares about her eight-year relationship with a priest, Will, who wanted to marry her. I read the book through first and enjoyed it more the second time as I studied her ideas for this talk. Sister Helen is a passionate, energetic, thoughtful, funny person. Fire describes her energy well. When Sister Helen first became a nun, she was called Sister Louis Augustine. One of her superiors would say about her, “There she, goes, that Sister Louis Augustine, her feet firmly planted in midair.”