

Kate Waller Barrett (June 24, 1857 – February 23, 1925):
Holiness in Our Time

Sermon delivered by Tal Day at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church,
Heathsville, Virginia
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"He said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?'" Luke 7:45.

In 2009, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church adopted text for a fourth revision of the Church's book of "lesser feasts and fasts." Lesser feasts are designated dates in the Church calendar set aside for celebration of named saints. All Saints Day, by contrast, is a major feast. This fourth revision is titled, *Holy Women, Holy Men*.

Significantly, *Holy Women, Holy Men* departs from editions published since 1979 by setting forth criteria and also procedures that the Church is to use as part of an ongoing process for recognizing and commemorating modern persons for holiness – or as saints. It reflects a view that the message of the Gospels finds continued expression in history through the life and work of notable individuals, as well as through other means.

At the request of Oran Warder, rector of St. Paul's in Alexandria, I have done research into the life and work of Kate Waller Barrett, a member of that congregation for nearly 30 years. She was the wife of an Episcopal clergyman and notable as a social reformer in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. Our celebration of All Saints Day and the publication of this fourth edition celebrating both ancient and modern saints are a propitious time to reflect on how the virtues that have historically marked saints may find expression in our time, as revealed in the life and work of a remarkable woman.

Kate Waller was born in Falmouth, Virginia, in 1857 into an old and wealthy plantation family. After a childhood disrupted by the Civil War and otherwise spent on one of the family plantations, and with only two years of formal schooling, Kate married Robert South Barrett at 19. She wanted to escape the confines of Stafford County society for the larger world.

Robert Barrett was then the young rector of Aquia Church, a church long associated with her family. He was at hand; he was eligible; and she believed he respected her intellect and her

curiosity. As a priest, Robert Barrett was more interested in how Christian principles had application in actual life than in the controversies over liturgy that were then roiling the Episcopal Church.

The first of the churches where Robert served after their marriage was in Butchertown, a poor neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. Later, he was called to become Dean of St. Luke's Cathedral in Atlanta, Georgia. A few years before his untimely death, he was appointed general missionary of the Episcopal Church, and the family moved to the Washington area. They bought a home on Duke Street in Alexandria, around the corner from St. Paul's.

Early in Robert Barrett's ministry in Butchertown, a destitute young woman and her infant son came to their door seeking aid. Robert asked Kate to see what she could do for the woman and her child. After finding them both some food and laying the infant on a sofa near where her infant firstborn was also sleeping, the two talked about how the young woman had gotten into such desperate straits. The young woman, it turned out, was also from the country, had been valedictorian in her country school, and had wanted to escape, as had Kate. The father of her child was the first educated man with whom the young woman had ever been associated, and he had abandoned her.

Kate later wrote:²

I turned away from her to hide my tears, and as I did so, my eyes fell upon the sweet smiling face of her baby, that lay all unconscious of the terrible burden its coming into the world had meant to its heart-broken mother. She, too, looked at her baby and bursting into tears said:

“I could stand it all for myself, but my poor, poor baby – to think how I have sinned against it.”

There the two babies lay, side by side, my boy and hers, both with equal possibilities for good, and terrible possibilities for evil; both innocent and pure; both equal in the sight of God; and yet in the eyes of the world, how different. My boy, with an honored name and a considerate and loving father; her boy, an alien without name or father. ... And when I realized that in this unequal struggle

against this helpless, trusting, heart-broken woman and her nameless baby, good men and bad men, good women and bad women stood shoulder to shoulder to keep her down and out, and to make it almost impossible for her to be an honest woman and true mother – that the unjust laws of society denied her the right to redeem the mistakes of the past by an unblemished future – my very blood boiled within me. It was all so different from what I had thought and imagined. Where was the terrible degradation, the hopeless depravity, the groveling nature with which I had always been taught to associate the fallen woman? I heard, with startling distinctness, our Savior’s question to Simon, “Seest thou this woman?” *Almost unknown to myself there entered into my heart at that moment a covenant with God that so long as I lived my voice should always be lifted in behalf of this outcast class, and my hand always held out to them.*

From that time forward, Kate Waller Barrett was committed to establishing a home to rescue pregnant unwed girls and other outcast women. The opportunity at last presented itself in Atlanta, and much of the community mobilized against the proposal in fear.

It was through Barrett’s skills in mediation that the supporters overcame that mobilized community opposition and obtained Atlanta City Council approval. Even then, there was need for financing. Through her further enterprise, she enlisted the support of Charles Nelson Crittenton, a prominent late Nineteenth Century philanthropist and evangelist, to obtain the financing essential for its establishment as one of the first of the Florence Crittenton Homes. Through her further efforts, the Crittenton homes grew into a national network.

As of her death in 1925, the Crittenton homes constituted nearly 30 percent of the homes of their kind and were a national model with an even broader influence. Among social workers mindful of the history of their profession, Kate Waller Barrett is recalled as the developer of this national network of rescue homes for unwed mothers and destitute women.

The homes are now a historical footnote – a model that yielded ground, within the profession, to the “scientific” social casework paradigm propounded by Mary Richmond, and that lost much of its relevance, in society generally, as women found increased opportunity in the workplace as shop clerks and office workers and had less need for the services and shelter the homes provided.

I have always found moving the appointed All Saints Day reading from Ecclesiasticus that begins, “Let us now praise famous men . . . “ The lesson speaks of persons who made names for themselves in their time and were honored in their generations, but whose names are no longer known – known only to God.¹

Kate Waller Barrett is still somewhat known - “known,” not nameless. In May of this year, the City of Alexandria proclaimed a “Kate Waller Barrett Day”. The branch of the Alexandria Library that includes the City’s local history collection is named in her honor. There is a Kate Waller Barrett dormitory at William and Mary. Alexandria’s DAR Chapter, which she helped to found, was named in her honor shortly after its founding and her sudden death in 1925 at age 67.

In her time, Kate Waller Barrett’s significance loomed even larger. Barrett was an advocate as well for prison and orphanage reform. During World War I, she was instrumental in promoting sexual education among the troops that emphasized mutual responsibility and respect, rather than scare tactics. She was a founder of the League of Women Voters, a member of Presidential Commissions under both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, a delegate to the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of World War I, and in the last years of her life an advocate for disabled World War I veterans.

But notwithstanding how eloquently she wrote, the inspiration of the Gospels in her calling and life’s work is far less appreciated.

Almost unknown to myself there entered into my heart at that moment a covenant with God that so long as I lived my voice should always be lifted in behalf of this outcast class, and my hand always held out to them.

Barrett’s life from the time of her calling onward echoes features common in the lives of other saints that in themselves deserve note. They illustrate holiness in our time:

The *moral courage* that Barrett demonstrated is revealed in the lives of many saints. When Barrett began her rescue work, the offspring of unwed mothers were regarded as badges of

shame, to be spirited off to orphanages. The misfortunes of their mothers were thought what they deserved.

Conventional women of good status showed real ambivalence toward sexual impurity in other women. Pity and sympathy, strongly flavored by condescension was proper; tolerance of impropriety was not. Barrett rejected those prejudices; the Crittenton homes were places where unwed mothers could bond with their children and, with the Homes' support, could reintegrate into society.

The *moral balance* that Barrett demonstrated is also a striking, though not a consistent characteristic of saints. St. Francis of Assisi, for example, seized on a few ideas at the expense of all others.

By contrast, the stance of St. Paul in the Circumcision controversy in the early church has a close counterpart in Barrett's efforts to end prostitution and the suffering of the women involved:

Barrett worked for passage of the Mann Act, but never became the captive of abstract moral principles. When the city government in the District of Columbia later enacted legislation to shut down its red light district during World War I, Barrett intervened with President Woodrow Wilson to delay the enactment until homes could be found for the women who would be displaced.

Barrett's *humility* is also inspiring. She entertained no belief that she or the services of the homes were indispensable: As much as she wished to serve those in need, she humbly acknowledged that God's work was not be realized entirely through her hands or the work of the homes, that those women whom the homes proved unable to serve well might find other paths to salvation.

She conceived the mission of the homes in evangelical terms, as "homes" expressing Christian love. Their matrons, like Barrett herself, were not to be condescending, but should rather be moved by *gratitude* for the opportunity to serve the unwed and outcast women coming into their care.

Even the shameful acts of Barrett's youth and her later empathy ultimately served her calling. In rejecting the common criticism of "white slaves" for failing to escape their brothels or to take refuge from the streets, Barrett was mindful of how spirits could be broken by degradation.

At the age of six, Kate had been given by her grandmother the two young Negro girls who had until then been her playmates and friends as her slaves. From that point on, Kate ceased to look upon them as her friends, but as her property by divine right. She later wrote, "Many were the lessons of cruelty and lack of appreciation of the rights of others cultivated in me. They did not rebel, they knew too well the uselessness of it, and even when the war was over and they were free they still stayed on."³

As the onetime young mistress of two companions transformed into slaves, Barrett understood far better than most that the so-called "white slaves" needed no bolts or bars to hold them in their degraded life.

Like a number of other saints, Barrett committed herself to further preparation for service after realizing her calling. Also noteworthy is that from Barrett's first realization of her calling, Robert Barrett supported her commitment and supported her furthering her education to become a more effective advocate. With Robert Barrett's encouragement, Barrett earned a medical degree from the Women's Medical College of Georgia to gain a better ability to serve and understand the needs of the women needing help. Her degree was granted in 1892, 16 years after their marriage. With only her two years of prior formal education, she graduated first in her class.

In the lives of many saints, family get short shrift. Kate Waller Barrett is a notable contrast. Widowed at 39 as mother of 6 children, she integrated family life and work. Until very recently, a living descendant of Kate Waller Barrett who remembered her fondly was attending St. Paul's. The moral balance and gifts that distinguished her public life were benefits for her children as well.

No single saint can capture the full message of the Gospels. The Gospels' message can be captured only in part even in the life and works of the saints considered as a whole, both those named and those with names known only to God.

With that in mind, what is striking is how powerfully and creatively the Gospel message was expressed in the life of this one woman. Kate Waller Barrett was a major force in her time. By the standards of the Church, she was a holy woman, exemplary in many ways, even among the saints. Her dedication, intelligence, moral balance and imagination should be inspirations in our own.

COLLECT:

O God, who has blessed us with means and opportunities to serve the needs of others, grant that we may, like Kate Waller Barrett, respond to these opportunities with compassion and insight, and that, through our charity, we may be led to sound judgments about the sources of the needs that we serve and may be granted grace and strength to address those as well; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

NOTES

¹ Ecclesiasticus 44: 1-10.

² Otto Wilson, *The Life of Dr. Kate Waller Barrett* at 155-56. Arno Press 1974 (reprint) (quoting at length).

³ *Id.* at 146-47.

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