

March Madness: How about Lent Madness?

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My church, Christ Episcopal Church (CEC), just finished a unique Lenten experience. If you are not familiar with Lent, it is the forty days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday that is used as a time of fasting, repentance, almsgiving, and soul-searching for many Christians. This year, it was one of fun for our Adult Education class at CEC, but I must say we did learn a lot at the same time.

You may be familiar with the NCAA Basketball Tournament, which is also known as "March Madness." In that tournament, college basketball teams play each other in a series of brackets, with the winning team advancing and the losing team being knocked out.

A young Episcopal priest, Tim Schenck, came up with the idea in 2010 of having a similar type tournament, except "saints" would be matched up instead of college basketball teams. In the Episcopal Church, saints include not only some of the traditional saints of the Catholic and Orthodox faiths, such as St. Basil the Great, but also people who have not been formally sanctified. These would include people such as Johann Sebastian Bach, Anna Cooper, Thomas Merton, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. While not saints in the technical sense, we consider them saints in the spiritual sense, which means that they led noteworthy lives that we would do well to emulate.

The tournament starts with a Round of 32, proceeds by elimination to the Sainly 16, followed by the Elate 8, and then the Faithful 4. The winner receives the Golden Halo. Previous winners of the Golden Halo include George Herbert (2010), C. S. Lewis (2011), Mary Magdalene (2012), and Frances Perkins (2013). Now I know these are not household names, but the point of the tournament is to learn more about them, so that for us Episcopalians, they may one day be household names.

By the use of presentations, adult education class members used the tournament as an opportunity to study the lives of these saints. We would then vote informally. The actual vote in Lent Madness is done online, and as many as 7,000 people across the world have voted.

In this year's tournament, there were two finalists, Harriet Bedell and Charles Wesley. Wesley beat his more famous brother, John, who is credited with starting the Methodist movement in Christianity. Charles Wesley was a famous hymn writer; his hymn "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" is a staple of most Protestant Easter services.

Harriet Bedell is less well known, but she was an Episcopal missionary Sister who served poor people in two extremely different environments: Alaska and Florida. We were all surprised that she did as well as she did, only being bested by Wesley in a 51 to 49% vote total.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if one day we could have a Lenten Madness that included saints from other traditions? I guess that is something we could hope for. I know that some Christians honor and revere people from other traditions, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Rumi, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

If you would like to know more about Lent Madness, or even participate in 2015, go to <http://www.lentmadness.org/>. It's a great way to learn about people who loved God and served humanity.