Saints from the Fire

What happened in the lumber town of Hinckley, Minnesota, on September 1, 1894, was beyond horror. Four hundred white men, women, and children died, as well as countless Ojibwa in the pine forests all around. It's probably impossible to know how many human beings died in total, since more than a few transient logging camp workers from as far away as Nebraska were simply never accounted for.

Some call what happened a “fire storm.” That morning, there were fires all around; but to a region accustomed to forest fires, September 1, 1894, was no oddity, since, in any dry summer, smoke from a dozen fires might well be in the air.

No one seemed alarmed. What eye-witness accounts document is that something near to a cyclone or tornado—or even hurricane—was born out of climatic conditions that seemed, in fact, the eye of the perfect storm. First, darkness descended—some thought it a tornado cloud, some thought it was an eclipse, and some believed it was the end of the world. Lamps were lit, strategies mapped out.

But when the wind rose to gale-force, there was no time to think. Some made it to the railroad station, where two trains carried hundreds north to places they could get under enough water to save themselves from the inferno. One of those trains was eventually incinerated. It was awful. Absolutely horrible. Some cried to get on those trains, but eventually the conductors knew that stopping for a few more meant imperiling dozens of others. Frantic passengers, their own cars already burning, watched as dozens of others died in a flash of fire, as if they were little more than kindling. Hours later, when it was over, bodies lay all over town and into the country. Only smoldering tree stumps were left standing, homes and buildings simply gone.

It was 1894, and discovering identities was almost futile. Whole farm families were in gardens or potato patches, having left their pioneer homes for open ground. There was too much heat. Great fireballs reigned down from the sky.

Mass funerals were held, dozens of unrecognizable bodies thrown into open pits and buried together. No one will ever know. A much venerated pastor whose descendants I know happened to be close to Hinkley right then, a pastor, who was asked if he’d give a prayer over an open grave of so many who couldn’t get out of the way of the inferno.

What would you say? What would you ask? Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy.

An old train station in Hinckley tells the whole sad story very well. If you’re in the area some time, stop and look and listen.

The Greeks thought comedy played second fiddle to tragedy because tragedy, ultimately, touts the potential of human beings, while comedy simply laughs at who and what we are.
The Greeks were right. The Hinckley Fire, like so many others, was horrifying tragedy; but if you pick up a book in Hinkley, you can spend one great afternoon with stories of the survivors and all those saints who helped.

Almost unimaginable sadness in the Florida Keys and up on shore in south Texas right now. Nothing pretty, nothing encouraging, except the blessed good work of people helping each other.

In tragedy, in the eye of real darkness, real people, real sinners, get holy as saints.