

All Saints Day
Nov. 6, 2016
Luke 6:20-31
We are all Saints of God

Two days until our votes are counted, and All Saints Day. When I arrived at the church this morning, the power was out, the lights and heat off. Was there a message in that? Our first service was conducted by candlelight, and it was quite lovely. Nostalgic, really.

All Saints Day is about remembering. More importantly, this feast day is about renewing our sense of Christian vocation – the vocation of all of God’s people to enact justice, and to work for peace in the wider community and the world.

As a nation, we celebrate the memory of our founding fathers, our great presidents, the men and women who serve in our armed forces and those who have given their lives in the service of our country. We set aside several days each year in their names. Veteran’s Day, July 4, Presidents Day, Martin Luther King Day. Remembering the great ones reminds us what our country stands for and what our obligations and privileges are.

In similar fashion, we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries in our own families, remembering the names and traditions of those who have shaped our lives. I think of my dad, who played the piano and could make any song into a march, or a waltz or a rhumba for a little girl to dance to; my mom, for whom any barren patch of mud was a garden waiting to be planted; my grandma, who persuaded me when I was eight that the only way to spend a Sunday afternoon was playing canasta.

Some churches celebrate hundreds of saints, almost every day of the year being dedicated to one or more person. The Episcopal Church has a book, *Holy Men and Holy Women*, it’s several inches thick. Did you know that the Greek word we translate as saints also means ‘holy ones’?

Many of the Church’s saints led the early church and were martyred. The examples of these old Christians’ victories can inspire and give light to us, strengthen us when we are overwhelmed by our own weakness and problems.

The saints are not just those known to us by legend and history. Saints are known to us in this life. The apostle Paul addresses his letters (epistles) to “the saints” who are at Ephesus, Philippi, and so forth. These people were very much alive. They were blundering and making mistakes, just like you and me.

Tradition categorizes the saints as all the followers of Jesus. Past, present and future. Jesus’ definition is broader: Jesus says that *all* are children of God. We are all the holy ones of God.

Robert Louis Stevenson once said, *‘the saints are the sinners who keep on going.’* Faced with

difficult circumstances – saints are the people who keep on going. The people who ‘keep on keeping on.’

Today, we are a polarized nation. The presidential campaigns have been acrimonious, at times unethical, and deeply troubling for the future of our country. This political season has sowed anxiety and fear, anger, conflict, and real depression. Doom and gloom have been heaped upon us, especially these last weeks, with dire consequences predicted by both sides if the other candidate wins!

Last Sunday, homilist Dale Ramerman asked us to consider what the *gospel issues* are in this election. Is racism a gospel issue? What about misogyny and sexual degradation? Upholding the dignity of all human life from conception to death? These issues have not been presented as moral or social justice issues, rather they have been the centerpiece of polarizing political strategies. We have been encouraged to think in binary terms – black and white, with no shades of grey in the complex issues which our own life experience tells us are there.

Conservative columnist and former Bush advisor Michael Gerson said, “There is no difference in public influence between a politician who is a racist and one who appeals to racist sentiments with racist arguments. The harm to the country – measured in division and fear – is the same...”

What would George Washington, Abe Lincoln, Martin Luther King say to us? Washington shaped a new country, encouraging dialogue between patriots, royalists, federalists, states rights advocates. Abe Lincoln faced a country divided by the economic system of slavery, not just the justice issue of slavery. Martin Luther King was a voice of reconciliation in the midst of extreme violence, shootings, the loud voices of self-righteous anger from both white supremacists and spokespersons of color.

They would, I think, remind us that the fundamental moral choices are waiting for our attention. This country will not count the votes and go back to business as usual. The polarization, the anger and the fear will remain, unless we find a way to reconcile.

The people of the Church are called to be ambassadors for Christ’s reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20). We are all part of the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, ‘when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer’. That means that we – all of us– must share the work of reconciliation and healing.

Let’s build bridges. Seek out those who disagree with you and listen – grit your teeth, sit on your hands if you have to – but commit to truly listening to what they say. Hear what life experience, what fears and concerns underlie their positions.

This country cannot go forward divided by the arguments and accusations perfected in the election rhetoric. We must restore the dialogue of mutual respect and re-establish the commitment to work *together* for the common good of the nation. We cannot give up on the idea that character matters.

I am persuaded that George and Abe and Martin would agree with that.

We seem to be operating in survival mode in this divided country.

We all know what survival mode looks like, because we have all have experienced it at one time or another. In survival mode, you don't have enough time or energy to get even the basic necessities done. You work on just surviving, from day to day.

Survival mode is lived out in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety and it generates a sort of paralysis. Like refusing to consider *any* nominee for the Supreme Court, regardless of the merits. If we remain stuck in survival mode, we – as individuals and as a nation – won't have time to offer our talents and our time and our best efforts to assist our neighbors who are in need, be they across the street or across the ocean. To borrow a scriptural metaphor, in survival mode, we cannot do the crucial work of rebuilding the temple.

Jesus says:

I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27-28

Some of you looked at me a little funny this morning, when I suggested as you entered that you could light a candle for a saint, or for an enemy. Well, those words of Jesus are exactly what I was thinking about.

An on-line blog offered this thought:

If God forgave you as you have forgiven your enemy, would you be content with that?

Reconciliation and rebuilding is hard work. We must take the time to do it. The initiative is ours, as Christians. Can we trust that God is with us? Of course we can. Look to the community of saints, that great cloud of witnesses who have walked before us through times of trial and hardship, and risen victorious.

I want to talk briefly about the Beatitudes in today's Gospel, because some have mis-used Jesus' words in Luke's Gospel as justification for hardship and insult, rather than invitation to work for change and social justice.

Yes, 'keeping on' in life often involves suffering. Being poor, hungry, thirsty, persecuted. In today's Gospel, Jesus says these are the blessed. Then, Jesus adds,

"and woe to you who are rich ..woe to you who are full now for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now for you will mourn and weep."

Sounds more like a curse than encouragement. This is a topsy-turvy sort of good news, mixed blessings that are intended to unsettle us, before moving us to hope and commitment.

Most of us in this congregation live somewhere in the center, rather than on the margins where Jesus preached so often. When we hear ‘the last shall be first and the first shall be last,’ we see ourselves somewhere in the middle of the pack. We enjoy privilege rather than discrimination. And we can’t dismiss this language of blessing and woe as “not about us.”

Jesus’ words are a reminder of the temporary nature of wealth and prosperity, and the harsh possibility of losing all that *we* count as blessing. Then, too, there is something to be learned about self-satisfaction, and conceit. About seeing ourselves as ‘winners’. When we feel we can take perfectly good care of ourselves, it is too easy not to put our trust in God. Woe to us, indeed.

This is not a binary world. Jesus urges us to go where Jesus goes: to the poor, the sick, the hungry, the oppressed. We have been blessed. We are to bless those who set themselves *against* us and *against* Christ.

Not just forgive our enemies, but bless them. Live out our faith in the midst of difficult circumstances. Reconcile and rebuild for the Kingdom.

The days ahead call each and every one of us to be extraordinary, whether or not history remembers us. We are just plain *amazing* people. The Saints of God.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
Nov. 6, 2016