

All Saints Sunday

Matt. 5:1-12

Nov. 2, 2014

The Saints who stand by us today

Is All Saints Sunday about the dead – or the living? An Episcopal ‘both and’? We have conflated the celebrations of All Saints, All Souls, Day of the Dead, Hallows Eve and the secular celebration of Halloween. We don’t seem to be inclined to sort it out. Why is that? Are we frightened by the implications if we allow ourselves to reflect more deeply on death and salvation? In yesterday’s Skagit Valley Herald, religion columnist Terry Mattingly suggested that there is a fault line in US churches which runs through our Christian thinking about the path of salvation – is salvation found through Jesus alone?

At Christ Church we decided to hold a Vigil of Light on All Hallows Eve – just to see what would happen. On Friday evening – Hallowe’en – we opened the church and invited trick or treaters to step inside our new narthex. About ten costumed little people bravely walked up the candlelit steps. Each received a scroll explaining the religious significance of Hallowe’en and a handful of ‘testamints’ (candy). We invited the parents and other adults who passed by to come inside, too, and to light a candle of remembrance or place the name of a saint in their lives on the wooden cross – but most hovered outside, Hallowe’en wasn’t for *them*, after all.

Was it too religious, or too macabre to remember the dead? Too dis-spiriting to remember grief and loss on this Hallmark holiday celebrated with attention to political correctness of costume?

It is uniquely Christian to hold grief and hope, loss and celebration of life in the same moment. We know that without life, there is no death, and that death marks a transition. The journey continues. The Christian All Saints celebration is about life, journeying on, not just the remembrance of the dead.

On our recent trip to the east coast, we visited our grandson at college in Sewanee, Tennessee. I want to talk about that for a moment. The University of the South is located on a high plateau, elevation about 2,300 ft. We took advantage of the balmy fall weather to go on a Saturday afternoon hike through the campus woods.

Led by a forestry professor, and a professor of geology, we scrambled down and eventually back up an elevation of about 200 feet, a hike of about 2.5 miles that meandered through the woods. Thanks to our guides, we saw and heard things we would have missed had we gone alone, like the differences in the height of the tree canopy, and the identification of rock out croppings and trees. It was all good – right down to the golf balls collecting in one section near the campus golf course where students test their long drives; the place where the still had been during prohibition; the waterfall where in the 1890's a woman climbed down the cliff side to wash clothes for the wealthier students; a cave with a vein of coal that over the century past provided heating fuel for those in need. In some places the acorns were so thick it was like walking on marbles; in other

places mud from heavy rains two days before made the walking treacherous. The landscape spoke of the past and present.

Our companions on the walk were students, parents and grandparents – about twenty of us in all – a random group of strangers, and yet not so random because it was Parents Weekend, and certainly not strangers by the time we emerged back into meadow light and a feast of scones and cider. I found myself wondering why the path was here, not over there; going up this hillock and behind that rock, not straight across; around this tree and not that one. If you have ever forged a new path in the woods, or broken trail through deep snow, why do you choose the way you do?

“We make the road by walking,” so theologian Brian D. McLaren titles his newest book. There is no path, no way, until *we* walk it. So it is a paradox that we learn the way from those who walk *before* us, and we learn from our companions on the way. We make the road by walking.

Our faith journey is this, the road we make by walking. On All Saints Sunday we acknowledge the long line of heroes, the saints who follow the way of God. Saints who take responsibility for the world and actively resist injustice. We pray for the communion of saints – those who have gone ahead, those who are living and walking among us now, and those who in the future will be. These are all people like you and me, people with limitations and faults, people whose differences are many, and whose unity lies in their understanding that salvation comes from God. It matters who we call a saint. Saints are not just those people declared saints by the church, or declared ‘great’ by history. Saints are not just those whose outward life demonstrates certain signs of holiness. Saints include those who have touched our lives, whose example or friendship encourages us to live more fully. These are the saints we invoke to stand beside us today.

Perhaps you are named for or after a church saint, a person in Scripture, or a family member. By having the same name, you take on something of the reputation that goes with that name. Your Dad? Your grandmother? Inspiration from the past becomes aspiration moving through your name. A recent newspaper ad reads, ‘You can be anybody– be *somebody*’. ‘Somebodies’ are saints we invoke to stand beside us today.

I recall a homilist speaking from this lectern a few years ago saying that the central issue of being human is death, and that we spend much of our lives seeking to avoid death. McLaren says something different: we seek ‘aliveness’. We run half marathons, we eat at restaurants or invent new recipes, we vacation away from home, to enter more fully into life. *Aliveness*. Our prayer is most often about now, not about eternity. *Give us today...save us from the time of trial...* The Israelites followed Moses because they sought *aliveness* out of the shadow of the slavery and domination of the Egyptian pharaoh. Adam and Eve sought *aliveness* – more experience of life – when they ate of the forbidden fruit. Our search for *aliveness* encourages us to walk new paths.

The Eucharist is about *aliveness*, entering fully into life. Strength, courage, renewal. The power

of Resurrection at work in our lives. We celebrate the Eucharist in the communion of saints, these saints we invoke to stand beside us today.

John's Book of Revelation offers an apocalyptic or end-times vision of countless multitudes in heaven, people from every nation, tribe and language, gathered before the throne of God. There is no limitation – geographic, ethnic, economic or otherwise. They have in common their faithfulness to the Lamb. They sing and praise God for all eternity. I laugh every time I hear the hymn we sang for our entrance hymn to day, *For all the saints who from their labors rest*. The vision of Revelation is of a moving, living, energized communion of saints eternally active in God's service. None rest in the past.

John gives us another visual– these multitudes have washed their robes. Washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. What a simple image to convey that these multitudes are *active in their faith*. They are not passive, nor are they without faith. These are not people waiting to be served by God, these are people who seek to serve God.

They will no longer suffer, or experience hunger, or thirst. 'The Lamb will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

The Revelation passage compliments the Beatitudes in our Gospel lesson. Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn, those who are persecuted, reviled. The Beatitudes are not about rewards in the afterlife. They are about kingdom, the paradox of now and not yet.

It is sometimes suggested that we substitute "happy" for "blessed" to make sense of the idea that the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, are blessed – they are 'happy.' Or at least they will be. Well, that runs flat up against my world experience. It doesn't work, although some may use it to excuse themselves from a compassionate response to those in need.

If 'happy' were the point of Jesus' teaching, one commentator suggests the Beatitudes might sound like this:

blessed are the powerful, the well-connected, the well-educated, those who pursue personal happiness and abundant acquisition ... they will succeed.

The Hebrew word for *ble*ss is *ashar*, meaning literally, 'to find the right road.'

The Beatitudes offer a revolutionary vision of Kingdom which overturns the status quo. The first four Beatitudes focus on those who suffer now, but who will receive justice in the coming reign of God. The remaining verses promise God's favor on those who work to alleviate the conditions describe in the first four Beatitudes.

Our culture invites us to pity the poor in spirit, those who are persecuted – Jesus reminds us that these people are no less than us, and indeed, they are blessed among us. They are on the right

road. *Ashar*. Have compassion, not pity, and walk *with* them. These are saints who stand beside us today. They make the road by walking.

Blessed are they who mourn. Many of the teens who lost friends in the Marysville shooting last week are making a new road, walking side by side. These teens grieve for the shooter and the victims together: we are community, they say, and we celebrate their lives and mourn them *all* as part of this community. These are saints who stand beside us today.

Might we be brave enough to change our world view in a similar way, to grieve our enemies' losses as our own, and in doing so catch sight of the Kingdom?

We invoke the saints to stand beside us today.

We make the road by walking.

Ashar. Blessings.

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