

All Saints– Year C – Track 2 – 11-3-2019

Happy feast day, saints of God! As we sang in our opening hymn, and as we will sing in the offertory and post communion hymns, today is about *all* the saints – we, here still struggling in the pews, and all those who have gone before us. This is the “communion of saints” in which we profess our belief every time we say the Apostles’ Creed.

Last night, a few of us gathered here – in the quire – for Compline. November 2nd is the day celebrated in the Book of Common Prayer as the “Commemoration of All Faithful Departed” – and so we read the Necrology – the names of those from this parish family who have died this past year and the names of our beloved who have gone before perhaps many years ago. Our belief in “the communion of saints” –is a recognition that we – and all those who have gone before us – are really part of one great body in Christ. We are linked – those of us here with those we can no longer see... From one perspective, the dead are gone from our sight... but from another, they are with us here – and we form one great communion.

The heart of this “feast” of all saints is laid out in our opening collect: “You have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord...” That first part is the recognition that we are all – both living and dead – part of the same body of Christ, forever linked in the communion of saints. But the prayer continues: “Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living...” That part is a recognition of our calling – to virtuous and godly living.

If you Google “godly living,” you’ll find a host of definitions from a wide variety of sources. Most of them seem concerned with not doing certain “ungodly” things. But I think we have only to look at today’s Gospel to find the best answer to what “godly living” means – of what it means to live like God.

What we have today is the sermon on the plain – Luke’s version of Matthew’s more famous sermon on the mount. And so typical of Luke’s Gospel, what Jesus lays out here is a world upside down, a world that makes no sense to a rational mind intent on preserving and building up its own self, its own dominion. For Jesus, these “beatitudes” are a description of the values of the kingdom of God. They are the description of a way of life, the way to life in the heart of God. Here in Luke’s version, we have a series of *blessings* followed by a series of *woes*.

The “woes” are not curses – not the opposite of blessing. They are more like “Yikes!” As commentator Matthew Skinner says, “Jesus therefore promises relief to some groups, to those people who travel rough roads through life. To others, to folks who find existence rather enjoyable or easy, he cries, ‘Look out!’”

And the reason folks who are comfortable, who are rich and full and laughing, should “look out” is because Jesus is not talking about rewards or punishments in some hereafter. No, Jesus is talking about the reality of living in the kingdom of God now. Again, Matthew Skinner says, “If the reign of God “is among you” (Luke 17:21) already, even now, then the blessed and woe statements signal something for people to experience in the present.” The word Jesus speaks in these Beatitudes – and in the rest of his teaching – are prescriptions for what we *are* to do, how we *are* to live. And they speak to us about living from our hearts – living from the heart of God – living a *godly life*. And the consequence of living from the heart of God is that we blessed, are satisfied, we are at peace, we are at home. But the consequence of living to satisfy our own stomachs and wallets and pride and desire for power is that we are in essence deadening our own hearts, killing our own souls. We will be full and rich according to the standards of society which we adopt so easily, but our hearts will still be hungry, our lives will lack meaning.

The last lines of today’s gospel sum it up: “But 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. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

There is the description Jesus gives us of godly living. There are no “thou shalt nots” involved. Only love, do good, offer blessing instead of a curse, give. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

It’s a sharp contrast to the sentiments expressed in the psalm. There we heard,

Let the praises of God be in their throat *
and a two-edged sword in their hand;

7 To wreak vengeance on the nations *
and punishment on the peoples;

- 8 To bind their kings in chains *
and their nobles with links of iron;
- 9 To inflict on them the judgment decreed; *
this is glory for all his faithful people.

The contrast – the upside-down-ness that Jesus describes is the abundance of the mercy of God. It is *we* who would like to wreak vengeance. But Jesus tells us again and again that *God's* justice is mercy, not vengeance. And the only “binding” that God does is to bind us in love.

We have this reading on this feast of All Saints because these are the values that we have seen these people we call saints embody in their lives. We do not honor “the saints” because they followed the commandments. We do not honor them because we think they were sinless. They do not wear crowns or white robes that were awarded like stars on a chart in school for having the fewest absences or the most perfect scores. We honor them, we claim them as examples, because they dared to live the values of the One they chose to follow, they dared to live out who they really were.

I think we would much prefer simply to be safe, to have salvation be a matter of following the rules and then getting a reward in the hereafter, the crown or robe or harp and cloud. But Jesus tells us again and again that we are meant for more than that. Jesus tells us we are created as more than that. We are created, not for following rules and blindly obeying commands, but for living out as faithfully as we can the expression of God that God breathed into us at our birth. We are created to live *godly lives*. We are created to be saints.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We have no idea what effect our lives have on those around us, or who will come after us. But we are all called to be saints, examples of living the values Jesus proclaimed in the beatitudes. And we need others to be those examples to us.

In this parish, there are those who have lost and mourned and lived, and now tell other mourners, by their own lives, that there is life after loss. There are those here at St. John's who live out their conviction that the homeless do not matter less than the wealthy. St. John's is still here today because of a small "Altar Guild" full of women who held on for dear life with hearts centered on keeping it alive for the generations to come. These, all these, are saints – not because they are or were focused on saving their own souls, but because they were and are living out who they were created to be by God.

Leonard Cohen said, "A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love."

It has everything to do with the energy of love, and I do not believe it is a remote human possibility. Rather, it is the possibility inherent in who we are, inherent in God who breathed us into being. It is that energy of love that matters. In the end, it is only that energy of Love that matters.

As we prayed in the opening collect:

"Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you."

May it be so.

[Daniel 7:1-3,15-18](#)

[Psalm 149](#)

[Ephesians 1:11-23](#)

[Luke 6:20-31](#)