

Sunday, November 3, 2019
All Saints' Sunday (Year C)
Luke 6.20-31
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Communion of Saints: Past, Present, and Future”

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear the first third or so of the Sermon on the Plain—Luke's parallel to Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon Jesus seeks to identify and develop a vision of a new world, and new behaviors needed to bring about that vision. This new world that Jesus envisions is grounded in the image of God as all merciful, all gracious. This new world that Jesus envisions can only be brought about through God's children reflecting God's graciousness in their own lives.

Jesus' message, with four “blessed are you” statements and four “woe to you” statements indicate Jesus was not just preaching about some abstract concepts. He was specifically addressing issues pertaining to those present. Blessed are you. Woe to you. And the fact that he used both blessing and condemnation on the same issues indicates he was speaking to a very diverse crowd. After all, he would not have bothered with “blessed are you who are poor” if there were only rich people in the crowd. He would have gone straight to “woe to you who are rich.” And vice versa. Why criticize the rich if there were only poor people in attendance. No, this was obviously a diverse group of people who were drawn together for one purpose. To hear Jesus' message. A message that was not just focused on one particular group of people. A message that was not just directed to one particular group of people. Rather, it was a message for all people, accessible and applicable to all people.

Jesus certainly had a definitive message. Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry now, but woe to you who are full now. Blessed are you who weep now, but woe to you who are laughing now. Blessed are you when people hate you, but woe to you who others speak well of. But it was not so much about the specific “blessed are” and “woe to” statements. Yes, those were illustrative of what Jesus was talking about. And, if anything, maybe Jesus was using those specifics to grab people's attention. To get them to listen closely and maybe to even examine their own lives. “Uh oh, I have more in the ‘woe to’ column than the ‘blessed are’ column. Maybe I need to pay attention.” Because what Jesus is laying out here is a new understanding of how the world should operate. How the world needs to change in order to operate according to God's ways. All of this flowing from Jesus' image of God as a merciful Father who loves and cares for all his beloveds. Which God demonstrates by freely extending his grace to all. And as his beloveds, we are to do likewise.

Jesus then takes his message from the specific to the more generalized synthesis of what all this means. That this ultimately boils down to the final few lines of today's Gospel lesson: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” and so on. But the real clincher is the final statement: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” This pretty much sums up everything that Jesus was about. It's really just another way of saying “love your neighbor as yourself”—part of the Great Commandment. Perhaps the more difficult part. Jesus invites those present to demonstrate radical love,

compassion, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, and blessing, to everyone they encounter. Not just to those who are like they are. But even to those who are different from them. Even to their enemies.

But, in many ways, what was even more important than the message being delivered are those who gathered to hear the message. Those gathered, in all their diversity. Even though some fell into the “blessed are you” category and some fell into the “woe to you” category. Despite their differences, they were there to hear Jesus. They were there to learn. They were there to be transformed. These are our early forefathers and foremothers in faith. Those who came together to learn from Jesus what it means to be faithful followers of Christ.

And isn't that why we are here? People of different backgrounds—different races, different ages, different genders and gender identities, different sexual orientations, different socioeconomic statuses, different education levels, different political perspectives, different abilities. All coming together to hear, to learn, to be transformed. We are a mirror of those who came together to hear Jesus' Sermon on the Plain. We are a mirror of the entire Body of Christ, spread throughout the world. We are a mirror of the “great cloud of witnesses”—of all the saints who have gone before us. We are a mirror of all the saints who will follow us. All of us coming together to share a common purpose—to be transformed.

Just for clarification, when I use “saints” here, I use it in the broadest possible context. I'm not just talking about the “named saints”—just those who have been canonized or specifically declared saints by the Church—the likes of St. Francis of Assisi, Mother Teresa, St. Gregory the Great, and so on. Here I use “saints” in the way St. Paul used it in writing to the Church in Ephesus: as all the members of the body, as all the faithful.

On this day, we specifically remember all those saints in our own lives who have gone before us, serving as examples of what it means to live a life of faith. Those who have served as examples to us of what it means to live the Gospel through their words and actions. Lutheran Pastor Margaret G. Payne provides a wonderful explanation of who these saints are: “We remember the recently departed saints whose hearts were intertwined with our own, and we also remember the many other saints, living now on earth or in the church triumphant, who are knit together into the mystical reality of the communion of saints. Beneath the surface of all our busy days, beneath social groups and political groups; beneath gender, race, wealth, and poverty is a shared identity in Christ that knits us together, eternal companions, stretching throughout all time” (*Sundays and Seasons Preaching Year C 2019*, p. 275).

These are the ones who serve as our examples, who have informed us, as we, too, have grown in faith. As we continue to seek to grow in faith. As we continue to seek to grow into the fullness of who God has created us and calls us to be. Those who have borne the light of the Gospel, providing a light to show us the way. And, as Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of St. John the Evangelist notes, “We have a responsibility to be bearers of the light—a responsibility to those who are still to come. We have a torch to carry for a while, and then we pass it on” (*Synthesis Today* email, 10/30/19).

Today, even as we remember all the saints in our own lives, those who have passed the torch to us, we pass the torch to those who come after us. This morning, we will baptize the newest members of the Body of Christ: Heather Hall and Lucas Furtado Laursen. I can't think of a more fitting way to remember those who have gone before us than to share their legacy with Heather and Lucas. But even more so, baptizing these two further demonstrates and adds to the richness and the diversity of who we are here at St. Gregory's, of who we are as the Body of Christ. Female and male. Adult and infant. Two very different human beings in terms of background and stage of life. Yet, both beloved children of God. Both entering into the waters of baptism as individuals, and rising out of those waters as sister and brother in Christ. As sister and brother to us all.

After they are baptized, we will welcome Heather and Lucas not only into this family of faith, but into the entire Body of Christ, into the communion of saints, with the words "We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood." This is a statement of welcome. This is our charge to them—to proclaim the risen Lord. And this is our promise to them—that we share in this work together.

Today, we remember all the saints in our own lives. We honor them by recognizing how they nurtured us in the life of faith. We honor them by recognizing our own place in the communion of saints as we reaffirm our commitment to the life of faith through the renewal of our own baptismal vows. And we honor them by sharing our faith with the newest members of the communion of saints: Heather and Lucas. In this, we celebrate the past, the present, and the future of the wonderful and sacred mystery that is the Church.