

Sunday, November 6, 2022
All Saints Sunday (Year C)
Ephesians 1.11-23; Luke 6.20-31

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1292760608211213>

(Sermon begins at about 22:05)

“Ancestors”

Throughout history, there have been a number of cultures and religions that have—and still do—place a great deal of emphasis on the place of ancestors in the ongoing life of the community. A variety, if not most, cultures, now ancient history, have recognized the importance of their ancestors through practices and rituals. Some of these continue into our own day. For example, a number of Asian cultures and religious expressions, as well as Native American tribes and religious systems, recognize the importance of the ancestors. And we are certainly familiar with the celebration of Día de Los Muertos, in which the dead are honored by leaving gifts for them on ofrendas, or special altars honoring the departed.

In such cultures and religious systems, there is a recognition that the ancestors, even though physically dead, continue to be active in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. In some cases, this is a recognition of the contributions the ancestors made to the communal life and well-being. A way of remembering family lineage and maintaining kinship values and family loyalty. In some cases, it is believed that the ancestors intervene in the lives of the living, providing guidance and blessings to, sharing in joys and sorrows of, their living relatives. In some cases, the ancestors are even believed to serve as messengers between the divine and the living. While sometimes referred to as “ancestor worship,” this really is a misnomer. Such cultures and religions do not generally worship the ancestors as divine, but venerate them as having a special place of honor in the lives of families and communities.

Virtually all cultures have some element of ancestor veneration. Our Christian tradition is no different. Although the specifics do differ. In our Christian tradition, we recognize a special category of the deceased, referred to as “saints.” Now, in its truest sense, a saint is any faithful person—that is, all believers. Which means, each of us is a saint. But right now we are talking about the saints who have gone on before, passing from this life into eternal life.

In Christianity—or at least those expressions that have maintained some semblance of catholicity, like our Anglican tradition—we recognize and commemorate those officially recognized as saints by the Church. Those who have been canonized, or specifically declared a saint based on specific criteria. These include the likes of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick, the Blessed Virgin Mary, etc. Each saint has a special “feast day” associated with their life and ministry. Beyond that, there is a general celebration and remembrance of the saints—All Saints’ Day, which we celebrate on November 1st. A day when we collectively remember all the saints officially recognized by the Church.

Now, there is another day dedicated to saints that seems to get lost in the shuffle: All Souls' Day celebrated on November 2. Also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, this is a day to remember all the “regular” folks who have died—our own loved ones who have entered into eternal life.

Between the two—All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day—we honor and celebrate all the saints. Those famous ones and those who are known to us alone—and to God. Collectively, these saints comprise our ancestors in the faith. Some churches, like ours, combine All Saints' Day and All Souls Day into one celebration, remembering all the saints who have gone before—famous and ordinary, known and unknown—on the Sunday immediately after All Saints' Day, and is known as All Saints' Sunday. This is the one time of the year when we intentionally focus on our ancestors in the faith and their contribution to our individual lives and the life of the Church community.

I bring all this up not just to give some background on why we do this thing called All Saints' Sunday. I also bring it up because it is important to be more intentional in our remembrance of our ancestors. Particularly those ancestors in the faith—those people of faith who have gone before us who were instrumental in bringing us to the life of faith. Those who were responsible in some way for educating us in the faith and helping to form the Christians we are today. For some it will be a beloved clergy person. For some it will be a parent or a grandparent, a godparent, a friend or neighbor. In short, anyone and everyone who has gone before who influenced you in your life as a Christian.

Our readings today honor our ancestors in the faith. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, begins by saying, “In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.” The foundation of our faith is obviously the life and ministry, the death and resurrection, of Jesus Christ. We sometimes talk about “knowing Jesus,” of having him in our lives in a real and tangible way. But there is no way any of us has ever met Jesus, the person who lived 2,000 years ago in Israel. Yet, we have met him and have come to know him in other ways. Most notably, through our ancestors in the faith. Through those who introduced us to Jesus. Those who shared with us who Jesus was for them. Through those who shared their life of faith with us in so many ways. Those who helped us to come to know and have our own relationship with Jesus. Paul uses the term “inheritance.” And this is what our ancestors in the faith have done for us. Provided us with that inheritance of knowing Jesus and having faith in him, so that we, as Paul says, “might live for the praise of his glory.”

How we do that is by taking that inheritance imparted by our ancestors in the faith and living into it as best as we can. And the number one way we do that is by following the teachings and example of Jesus. One of those critical, formational teachings is contained in today's Gospel reading. Jesus starts what is known as the “Sermon on the Plain” with a series of blessings and woes that are counterintuitive and completely at odds with the ways of the world—the way it was in Jesus' time and the way it continues to be in our own. Since when are those who are poor or hungry or weeping or hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed actually blessed? Looking at the world around us tells us there is absolutely no blessing in poverty, hunger, sorrow,

hatred, and exclusion. In fact, we try to avoid these. In the church, we work to try to eliminate these. And since when do those who are rich and those who are cheerful and those who are viewed with esteem actually experience woe, distress, and despair? Looking at the world around us tells us that wealth, happiness, and acclaim are all things to be desired and actively pursued.

But this is not really the point of the Sermon on the Plain. If anything, these statements by Jesus are meant to shock the hearer precisely because this is not the way the world operates—then or now. Not that the blessings and woes are not important in and of themselves. Certainly each of these blessings and woes point to key truths about life in God’s kingdom. In fact, entire sermons could be devoted to each blessing and to each woe. But Jesus does not elaborate. These are just a few examples to pique our curiosity. He could have gone on with many more examples of reversal. For that is what these are. Examples to illustrate, to help his hearers realize there is a way of thinking, of viewing the world, that is at odds with what we see around us.

Once Jesus has piqued the interest of his audience with such outlandish statements of “blessed are” and “woe to you,” he goes to the heart of his message. A message that encapsulates and explains the essence of each “blessed are” and “woe to you” statement:

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.

Giving more examples of what this new perspective looks like. Identifying the attitudes and behaviors that characterize the new way of understanding how the worlds works in God’s divine economy, in God’s kingdom. Summing it all up with what we refer to as the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them to do you.”

Now the Golden Rule is pretty self-explanatory. But as Jesus implies in the examples leading up to the Golden Rule, sometimes navigating the ways of God’s kingdom can be challenging, precisely because God’s ways sometimes conflict with the ways of the world. Sometimes God’s ways are counterintuitive when compared with the way the world tends to really operate. That’s when we need a personal guide to help us understand and navigate God’s ways. And that’s where our ancestors in the faith come in. Those who have been there for us, guiding us on our journey. Just because our ancestors in the faith are no longer here, does not mean that they no longer have anything to teach us. Their examples continue on in our lives, if we but reconnect with them—not just on All Saints’ Day or All Souls’ Day. But whenever we find navigating the ways of the world in conflict with God’s ways. Whenever we need a reminder or a little encouragement. Our ancestors in the faith are still there to guide us in our ongoing lives of faith. Even though they have gone on before, they are still, as are we, part of the Kingdom of God. Part of the Body of Christ. Which makes them as much a part of our lives, as much a part of the community, as every other person in this room.

In the words of Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, “Death cannot kill the love which binds us together with our departed loved ones in a communion which transcends time and space. For it is ultimately the unbreakable bond of love which lifts us above both time and space, and into the very life of God. (“Brother Give Us a Word” email, November 2, 2022).

Thanks be to God for the saints, for our ancestors in the faith, who brought us into and continue to support us in our lives as God’s beloved children.