

The Light of the Saints
Matthew 5:1-12; All Saints Sunday; Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

It's been thirty-six years ago this month that the baby almost lost his hands. He'd been born in a small country hospital, and at day six he'd developed unexpectedly severe jaundice. His grandmother had been giving him a bath while his mother tended to his toddler older brother, when the grandmother called out, "This baby's yella!" And with that they headed back to the hospital.

Thirty-six years ago there were no take-home glowworm blankets in which to wrap a severely jaundiced baby. The only protocol was to admit the child and put him under a bilirubin light. As you might imagine, in a country hospital with no pediatric ward, in the days anyhow before warm colors and kid-friendly scenes, the experience was traumatic for an infant. To keep the light from mesmerizing the child and thus burning his staring retinas, gauze blinders were placed over his eyes. And to keep him from incessantly pulling the gauze away, someone created little make-shift pouches of gauze and put them over the baby's hands like mittens. The mittens were kept snugly in place by some convenient elastic rubberbands.

For a while the baby kept pawing at the blinders covering his eyes, but then he merely lolled his arms about. And finally he quit raising his arms at all, as though his hands were too heavy to move. No one is quite sure how long it was before a new nurse on duty looked askance at the makeshift mittens and removed the rubber bands from the infant's wrists, but when the mittens were taken off, the newborn's hands were limp, cold, and very, very blue.

Immediately, the nurse began firmly but carefully massaging the tiny child's hands. She spoke to the baby soothing words, though tears of concern welled in the corners of her own eyes. She cooed and sang and stopped periodically to thump the child's palm with a finger to see if he had any feeling or reflex. For a long time—or, at least, for what seemed like a long time—the nurse continued her work. And then, finally, she was able to tease life back into what had felt like dead, cold tiny lumps of flesh. The doctor stormed in demanding to know how this had happened, how someone could constrict a child's hands so. But while he blustered, the nurse smiled at the baby once more and for a final moment warmed his hands in hers. And then she left the room, nameless, and, forever to that baby with gauze on his eyes, faceless. She saved his hands in the course of a day's work and moved on, perhaps to save someone else's life.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. That's the sixth beatitude of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and it, along with its fellow beatitudes, is what we read in church on the Sunday of All Saints. The sixth beatitude has always captivated me, mainly because it so eludes me. I mean, I know what it means to mourn and to be poor in spirit. And, though I may not be the best at it, I at least know what it looks like to be merciful, to be a peacemaker, or to be meek. But pure in heart? I don't know about your life, but that one escapes me!

That's the human problem in a nutshell, really. *We aren't* pure in heart. Our motives are mixed; our desires are confused; our souls are restless. The Church Father Gregory of Nyssa says that life is, as we *grow*, more akin to a *sinking*, a process during which the pure image of God stamped upon our hearts falls deeper and deeper into murky brine, until our hearts are "caked over" with the impure barnacles of the world. Hearts created pure become sullied, and our whole lives end up being lived in disappointment and confusion because we do not live purely.¹

And yet, Gregory is a man of hope. He believes, unlike so many of the more pessimistic Western Church Fathers, that, assisted by God's grace, the human heart can return to "purity, holiness, [and] simplicity."

How do we accomplish this? Most usually through committed, prayerful practice. We give ourselves to good and godly work; we listen for the voice of God; we pray. And in time, with much God-assisted practice, we are purified. But, then there are those rare moments when the confusing mist of impurity is scattered in an *instant*. We've all heard about such moments:

Outside an apartment building a woman is being beaten by an abusive spouse. Scores of neighbors pretend not to hear the screams outside their windows, but one—an otherwise ordinary guy—responds immediately, without forethought, and rushes to the aid of the defenseless one, risking life and limb.

In the workplace, someone becomes aware of dangerous and unethical behavior, and she champions the right and the good, knowing that the result will most likely be the loss of job and the stigma of the whistleblower.

A nurse walks into a cold and sterile hospital room, and she intuitively senses something wrong. She keeps her calm and saves a newborn's hands.

In all such instances, the actor describes his or her decision to act as no decision at all. "I just knew what I had to do," they say. Gregory might add that these moments are those in which

¹ See Gregory of Nyssa's "Sermon on the Sixth Beatitude."

a sliver or speck of God's image imprinted on the human heart is reflected, "just as the sun's rays shimmer on a piece of steel." These moments can serve as the yeast that leavens a life. Though they may at first be few and far between, just one such experience has the power to raise the whole of the heart slowly out of the deep and into the light of God that can illumine it completely. These moments often begin the formation of the saints.

For the rest of us, Gregory believes that our own hearts begin their return to purity when we seek out, surround ourselves with, and watch the saints around us. We can partake of their leaven, too. If we will pay attention to those brief glimpses all around us where the luster of Christ shines in the hearts of budding saints, we, too, can be raised by their example to the light.

I know the story of the six-day-old baby who almost lost his hands, because my grandmother told it to me. She sat in the corner of the room as the melee occurred, as the saintly nurse unbound the child's hands and massaged them, hope against hope, back to life. I remember the story, and repeatedly asked my grandmother to tell it to me over the years, because the newborn baby was me. When we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, I cannot help but recall that nurse.

When I was ordained a priest, the story took on even greater poignancy for me. Each week I stand before you at the altar of God and raise my hands in the orans position. It is a position of beckoning and invitation, and it is all about the hands. I stand before you, and I utter, "Let us join our voices with angels, and archangels, and with all the company of heaven," and I know this host to include a woman in a country hospital, a saint for a day and perhaps after that for life, who soothed and sang and massaged back to life the very hands I raise.

When we remember the saints, our hearts are made purer. I am not, usually, among the better of men. But when I recall that woman, who did not let her own fear well to the surface, but soothed my tender fear as she soothed my hands, I hear the angels sing, and in me the light shines warm and bright.

Remember this day the saints in your lives. Honor them; bless them; pray for them. And let their leaven raise you to lives bright as the sun.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*