

Covenant Word

Remember Them Anyway

Psalms 34:1-10; Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

*A Message by
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Formation
All Saints' Day
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The tragic lead stories on our local news, night after night, reminded me of hearing about a lawyer talking to his client who was accused of killing her husband. He asked her, "Were you with your husband when he died?"

"Why, yes. Yes, I was," she said.

"Well, did he say anything? Do you remember his last words?"

"Oh, sure I do. He was talking right to me."

Leaning in for this critical evidence that could save his client, "tell me, what did he say?"

"He said, 'Go ahead and shoot. You couldn't hit the side of a barn.'"

Not every soul is a saint.

Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her book *Accidental Saints*, discovers a sizeable monument to a woman named, Alma White, walking around downtown Denver. The memorial of sorts stands outside a peculiar looking church called the Pillar of Fire Church. The inscription on the memorial reads, "Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire Church, 1901."

Turning to her friend, she says, "That's a woman's name, isn't it? Did a woman plant a church in Denver in 1901?" She didn't know many women who had set out to plant a church much less at the turn of the twentieth century. Finally, a role model, she thought. She, too, was setting out to be a female pastor of a new church in Denver at the time. Nadia Googled Alma White and found an entry for her at Wikipedia. Reading the entry Nadia's excitement grew. It was true. Alma White was the founder and a bishop of the Pillar of Fire

Church. She became the first female bishop in the United States. She was noted for her feminism... [Yes!] The article continued. Bishop White was also known for her association with the Ku Klux Klan, her anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and hostility to immigrants. Another one bites the dust.

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When Nadia's Episcopal friend heard the story, she said, "I'll add [Alma White's name to] the Litany of Saints along with all the [others]." Nadia writes, "I didn't want Alma White's name on the Litany of Saints. Having her name alongside the names of Saint Frances and [Mother Teresa] felt wrong. I want the racists to stay in the racist box. When they start sneaking in to the saint box, it makes me nervous. But that's how it works, right? On All Saints' Sunday, [we] are faced with the sticky ambiguities around saints and sinners. And the duality that exists in them both." (Bolz-Weber)

In Matthew's gospel, we have been hearing the stories and parables of Jesus. These texts have been in our faces with Jesus again and again saying things like the last shall be first, and the first shall be last and that prostitutes and day-laborers make great dinner guests... After weeks of pointed parables, our ears may be eager to hear these verses of blessing today from Matthew 5. We return to the beginning of Jesus ministry in today's lectionary reading. On the mountainside, Jesus begins telling them who are the blessed. I can just see the Type A

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disciples with their stone tablets and chisels ready to write it all down. These blessings, however, may not have produced the kind of virtuous checklist that these listeners were hoping for.

If you are expecting a list like we hear in the Ten Commandments, or Proverbs 6 or Galatians 5: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness and humility. You may be surprised. Instead, Jesus' Galilean and Jewish audience was met with some startling news. Those they thought were fit for the kingdom might not be. And those they thought were surely excluded may be on their way to sainthood. Our ears recognize the conditional list of the Blessed as more of the same -- a



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prelude to the rest of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is consistent after all.

This word, Blessed, or Bles-sed, is problematically translated into English. Makarios is the original Greek word. Some have translated this word to mean Happy, but that's not the best understanding here in Matthew 5. The word is better understood as honorable, even enviable. This is who we should admire, in other words.

Enviably are the poor in spirit...
Honorable are those who mourn...
If you're going to admire someone, it should be the meek and those who hunger and thirst – for righteousness.
Envy those who are persecuted...
If you're going to honor someone, look to for the one others insult...

Just as we've been learning in the texts and parables of previous weeks, with Jesus, it's all about proximity. Even here in the beatitudes. Look back at how chapter four ends. Just before Jesus goes up on the mountainside to teach, Matthew's gospel tells us that he has been walking all throughout Galilee, teaching and preaching good news, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. Diseased, demon-possessed and those suffering from severe pain, it says, Jesus walked and stood and sat among them. Large crowds from all over the region followed him. People who looked different and smelled different came to find him. He was easy to find, I suspect. Just look for the sickest and saddest bunch of humans you would ever see and listen for the murmuring.

Proximate yourself among the infirmed, the outcast, those at the end of their ropes. Locate yourself amidst the pain and suffering in the world and at the very moment that you begin to care, you will find yourself cared for. You will find yourself blessed. This is the way to the Kingdom. This is the promise of the Beatitudes. This is the passion of the saints.

Dr. Paul Brand was an orthopedic surgeon who pioneered muscle-tendon-transplants in leprosy patients. He located himself among the poorest in India. Brand's career centered on the most problematic aspect of creation for many people – the existence of pain. This was one of the prolific Christian writer Philip Yancey's deepest faith questions, *Where is God when it Hurts?* Yancey learned from Brand the value of pain - and that God is found right there in the suffering. He wrote about it in his book, *Soul Survivor*.

Holding up as proof the terrible results of leprosy – damaged faces, blindness, and loss of fingers, toes and limbs – all of which occur as side-effects of painlessness. The young doctor, Paul Brand, practicing in India, made the groundbreaking medical discovery that leprosy does its damage merely by destroying nerve endings. People who

lose pain sensation then damage themselves by such simple actions as gripping a splintered rake or wearing tight shoes. Pressure sores form, infection sets in, and no pain signals alert them to tend the wounded area (Yancey, *Soul Survivor*).

Most people view pain as an enemy, but a good physician sees pain as an ally. It forces them to pay attention to threats against the body. Without it, heart attacks, strokes,

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ruptured appendix would all occur without warning. Brand was the first physician to appreciate that leprosy did not cause the rotting away of tissues, but that it was the

loss of the sensation of pain which made sufferers susceptible to injury.

Most people still view pain as an enemy-- exhibited by so many addicted to pain-killers and the opioid pandemic in this country. Our pain is meant to be a warning sign so that we get help! Buddhists say to embrace one's suffering tenderly with the energy of mindfulness and say, 'Dear one, I know you are there. I am going to take care of you,' just as you would your crying infant. Embrace the hurt in order to learn from it. Embrace the hurting and see the face of God. People of faith, after all, know that joy and sorrow; pain and hope co-exist in a spirit-filled life. What if people of faith put themselves in proximity to the faithless hurting-so-badly-they'll-do-any-desperate-thing and offered an ear that listens, an understanding tone of voice, their simple presence, their resources or their expertise? It may not seem like much, but then the Beatitudes say: their would be more comfort, more of God's rule, more things of eternal value, more kinship, more peace, more caring in the lives who need it most. The results of doing the honorable thing (peacemaking, mourning, thirsting for God), is the second-half of every blessed line of Matthew 5:1-12. Wouldn't this chaotic world be a different place if there was more of that loose in it?

Embrace the hurt in order to learn from it. Embrace the hurting and see the face of God.

On All Saints Sunday, we honor those who mourn. We honor our own mourning. We name those we have lost over the past year from our congregation. With love and laughter, may we remember them. Who they are continues to

influence the world because we remember them.

Lane Powell. Ina Sims. Betty Norris. William Lovechia.

We remember others dearly departed from our own families and friends. We do this hard work of remembering because it puts us in proximity of blessedness. The day after All Saints is called All Souls Day. All Souls Day in the Catholic tradition involves praying for souls in purgatory – those who died without being perfectly cleansed from their sins. But we Protestants tend to bring the two days together, believing that we are not dealing

with duality. In other words, the Alma Whites do get their names on the Litany of Saints. All those who are officially called Saints are merely a subset of all souls. Beatitudinal people are asked to remember all the souls. So, as we have named these our dearly departed saints, I ask you to remember some other souls who have died in the past year. In remembering, we put ourselves in proximity to the dying and the mourning.

I invite you into a blessed space as I name some of the more prominent losses just from this past year, you may also name the personal individual ones on your heart and mind.

Brazilian soccer team and all those who died in a plane crash in Colombia;
Berlin Christmas market attack that left 12 dead;
Seventy-four killed during rioting in a stadium in Egypt;
An unarmed police officer killed in the attack on Westminster Abbey;
The San Bernadino school shooting;
22 dead after a bombing at a concert in Manchester, England;
Bombing in Kabul, Afghanistan;
Attack on the London Bridge;
Five officers killed in what was supposed to be a peaceful protest in Dallas;
Thirteen dead in violent attack in Barcelona;
Deadly earthquake in Mexico;
Hurricanes in Houston, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands that claimed too many lives;
Las Vegas mass shooting;
Most recently, New York City;

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.
All souls are not saints. We remember them anyway.

Roger Talbott shared this story recently in *Christian Century*.

After I had buried another citizen of our small community, and bid the family goodbye, Laurence asked me if he could take me on a tour of the cemetery. It was a beautiful morning, so I accepted his invitation.

In those days and in that part of the world, neither Laurence nor I would have used the word "gay" to describe him. There was no respectful word, to describe what made Laurence different. Therefore, part of Laurence was invisible to his pastor and congregation.

What I knew of Laurence was that he was the community historian and our church's volunteer organist. He had retired from his paid job as a security guard.

Laurence showed me the graves of his parents and grandparents. Then he showed me the graves of a couple who had run the general store in town

until a few weeks before the wife died. The husband followed only a few days later.

Here was the grave of the village atheist, back in the days when every village had only one. Laurence said that the man spent his life cataloging all the contradictions in the Bible and, when he could find no more, took his own life.

There was the grave of a man who had worked for a power company in the eastern part of the state. He died in the electric chair for the murder of a little boy whose body was found in a field not far from where someone had seen a utility truck parked. I wondered how he could have been convicted on what seemed like only circumstantial evidence.

We visited several other graves and Laurence told me more stories. Then he told me what all these people had in common. They had all died, as the lawyers would say, "without issue."

"Who will remember them when I am gone?" asked Laurence. Then, looking up at me through his thick glasses, he asked, "Who will remember me?"

On All Saints Day we affirm that every life bears the image of God. Though that image may be easier to see in those who we call saints, it is true of all lives, if you look. When we cannot find that image in those who have died, we haven't gotten close enough to who they are, we haven't put ourselves in proximity to their pain. And then we can't fully proclaim the most important truth of all.

Though they be racists, bigots, despised, forgotten, we remember them anyway and thus find ourselves in the place of blessedness. We become like Christ, who came to seek and to save the lost, who took his place with all souls. (Roger Talbott).

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom," the thief said from his cross (Luke 23:42). There are perhaps no more human words in all of scripture, no prayer one can pray so honestly. (Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*).

May we, honoring those who mourn, embody one of the vocations of the church, to remember all the saints and all souls, always. Amen.