

Sermon for All Saints, November 1, 2020, Jane A. Beebe, “Saints Alive!”

In the early eighties, after having begun my first job in Grinnell, Iowa, I discovered the Episcopal Church. (And it happened because a friend invited me to attend. Just saying...) The 1982 Book of Common Prayer was my introduction to the Episcopal liturgical tradition, including the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds. The Apostles’ Creed forms the framework for the Baptismal Covenant that we reaffirm as a worshipping community whenever there is a Baptism. It is also the creed we say as part of the Daily Office, such as Morning Prayer. One of the things that we say we believe is that there is a “Communion of saints.” (BCP, p. 304) I have always been intrigued by this. What does it mean? Appearing as it does in the Baptismal Covenant, how does this belief shape our common life as disciples of Jesus? Why does it make sense that we hear the Beatitudes in the Gospel reading for All Saints? And what is a saint anyway?

About fifteen years ago I was honored to help a friend and colleague plan a memorial service for her mother. I will never forget the conversation I had with her before the service. In telling me about her mother, one of the first things my friend said about her mother was, “She was just a *wonderful* person.” I was soon to hear many of the ways this woman demonstrated an

indomitable spirit and a deeply loving, even healing, presence. The conclusion I came to then is: this woman is a saint! Not a saint in the way we often think: a life written large. I think of a saint as someone who lives her life according to the best light she knows—and sometimes succeeds.

John Wesley defined sanctification as, “...Pure love reigning in the heart and life.” Saints are not necessarily perfect. Sometimes they are quite eccentric! What they do demonstrate is great love: love for God and love for neighbor. As it says in 1 Peter: “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” (1 Peter 4:8-10)

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and essayist, said, “In [God’s] holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a pocket handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” (*Beyond Words*, “*Saint*”) Buechner also said, “A saint is a life-giver... A saint is a human being with the same hang-ups and dark secrets and abysses as the rest of us. I hadn’t known that before. But if a saint touches your life, you come alive in a new way...” (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 177) So, saints are *human beings*; saints are *alive*. Saints cause us to come alive.

Saints are deeply in communion with God. They exemplify to a high degree what we hear in 1 John this morning: “Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2) Saints show us that the Resurrection is real. At the same time, saints are in relationship with the rest of humanity; they are in communion with us.

The Beatitudes as recorded in Matthew appear in chapter 5. While we hear a bit about Jesus’ birth in the first chapters of Matthew, it is not until chapter 4 that we see Jesus as an adult at the beginning of his ministry: Jesus is baptized by John, tempted in the desert, and then begins healing people of their diseases. He echoes John’s proclamation that all should repent, “...For the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Rowan Williams said, “...The repentance of which the New Testament speaks, is the refusal to accept that lostness is the final human truth. Like a growing thing beneath the earth, we protest at the darkness and push blindly up in search of light, truth, *home*...” (*Resurrection*, p. 40) Saints seem to live their lives in such a way that they have one foot on earth, in the here and now, and one foot in the Kingdom. Saints are living icons; they are actually imbued with aliveness.

If saints are windows to the Kingdom, then the Beatitudes are doorways. Each beatitude shows us something of the reality, the concreteness of the Kingdom. Jesus goes up a mountain, then sits down to teach his (very new) disciples. It is no accident that this scene seems to evoke Moses's trips up the mountain to commune with God. Jesus' teachings in the Beatitudes show us how to live in the Kingdom—and, as always, they challenge and upend our notions of what it means to live a good life.

The word 'blessed' that we hear in each beatitude is sometimes translated as 'happy.' "Happy are they that mourn, for they will be comforted." That just seems too outrageous. Are the Beatitudes simply consolation prizes for all that is difficult in life? The door to the Kingdom opens when we pay attention to how we treat each other. God will surely comfort us. Yet God shows us this comfort through the care and love of others. This means if we want the Kingdom to be real for everyone, we have to invite others in. Here are some of the Beatitudes I believe exemplify a saint-like way of living.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

In our culture, we try to avoid material poverty as much as we can. So much so, that we have even materialized our spiritual lives. We want to appear in control, we want to be “positive,” we want to be enlightened only if it does not require too much from us. We are afraid to need anything. We distrust humility, fearing humiliation instead. The losses that we all sustain can sometimes make us bitter or brittle, or unable to act in our own best interests, much less those of others. This is the place I find myself once again: literally broken. I know God enters most easily through those broken places.

I believe that it is when we surrender to the difficulties in our lives, when we accept them, and acknowledge our limitations, that we are able to enter into the Kingdom – whatever that may mean to us. It is already near after all...

Saints allow God to transform the hard things in their lives into resources for those in their care: to “the least of these” as Jesus would say. In the Gospel reading we did not hear this morning Jesus says, “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Matthew 23: 11-12)

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

Those who mourn are probably all of us gathered here today. Even children are no strangers to death and loss. Grief is a journey that I heard described by one priest I know as a spiral. We think we are around one bend and it comes back around to the same place. Memories can be two-edged sometimes—but all the more reason to make space for them, to allow them to be. A friend wisely said that while we often find ourselves living our lives on the surface, an event such as the death of a loved one brings us to another level of time and reality. A saint is one who is able to transmute the pain of grief into compassion: “...To weep with those who weep...” (Romans 12:15)

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

The word ‘meek’ is probably not a word we currently find inspirational. Apparently, the French translation of the Beatitudes uses the word ‘*débonnaires*.’ That connotes quite a different spirit! I looked up ‘meek’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is the *second* definition that has words like “submissive, demure, quiet...” However, the first definition defines ‘meek’ as gentle, courteous, and kind. Maybe if we think of children as the meek of this world—or anything in need of our care—Creation itself—we will be on

the right track. Saints do all in their power to ensure that the meek really will inherit the earth. Otherwise, will there be an earth to inherit?

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

“Mercy” is one of my favorite words. Again, referring to the OED: showing mercy is showing compassion for someone who is powerless, or for a person with no right or claim to receive kindness. To show mercy is to express an empathy that allows us to build bridges to other people who are troubled.

The mother of the friend I mentioned earlier was a teacher for many years in the primary grades. She had grown up in California as a member of a migrant family. This gave her deep understanding of children who struggled for whatever reason. Parents of the children she taught were sometimes the cause of her pupils’ difficulties. She did not judge them. She did what she could to help them. Those who write about developmental morality would identify this behavior as exhibiting the highest ethical stance. It is how Jesus receives us.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

The radiance of God, the glory of God is so great that the human being cannot look directly at God. Yet we have a longing to do just that. I think of the excitement we feel at viewing a lunar eclipse. Maybe it is a reflection of that longing to see God: we cannot safely gaze at an eclipse either. Moses

caught a glimpse of God as God passed by. But God was careful to protect Moses' eyes. A quality that saints definitely possess is transparency—and transparency is the goal of a spiritual life. Transparency is attained by those who live with integrity, with focused intention. Saints can show us where to look, how to focus our gaze. Jesus tells us, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.” (Matthew 6: 22)

“Taste and see that the Lord is good;
happy are they who trust in him!

Fear the Lord, you that are his saints,
for those who fear him lack nothing.” (Psalm 34:8-9)

