

## Are Saints “Golden”? – Judy Cox

Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

I confess, All Saints Day never hit my radar at all growing up. Halloween overshadowed it by far, with its enticement of endless sweets available this one night just for the asking. Like many children, I was all about plundering the neighborhood living, not remembering the dead! Even when we in turn became those plundered by the younger generation, that mindset continued. It wasn't until fourteen years ago that All Saints Day took on new meaning for me— fourteen years ago yesterday.

On November 1, 2000, after a four-month struggle with cancer, my father Vernon passed away. His suffering had seemed senseless and overwhelming, especially in the last weeks before his death. In what turned out to be the last weekend of Dad's life, I was crying out to God for mercy for Dad, and crying out in bewilderment. Consolation came in a devotional reading from, of all places, the book of Job. In chapter 23 Job searches in the darkness, looking everywhere for God without success. Still lost in the dark, Job yet affirms God's awareness and presence: *He knows the path that I take; and when He has tried me I shall come forth as gold.* The Holy Spirit appropriated this word to me—Judy, your father shall come forth as gold!

Comforted with assurance of God's redeeming presence with Dad, I e-mailed this to my family, who also found comfort in it. My sister-in-law received the midnight call of Dad's passing three days later; weeping yet thankful, she hung up the phone and absent-mindedly flipped her “verse-of-the-day” calendar over, only to encounter, again, these words: *He shall come forth as gold!* Little did I know then that this passage is an appointed reading for the feast day of Anglican missionary James Hannington, martyred in Uganda on October 29, 1885. (So let's hear it for the blessing of lectionary readings!!!)

Did you realize that the Church usually celebrates saints' days on the anniversaries of their deaths—that is, on their birth-days into life of the eternities? You can see then, that for me All Saints commemorates all the unnumbered, unnamed saints, across time and space, and also merges very personally into the Feast of St. Vernon. ☺

All of our texts today celebrate the blessedness of God's saints, the beloved, the holy or “set-apart” ones, those in Christ. Blessedness sounds good to us, doesn't it? To stay with that “gold” theme: don't we all love being able to say, “Life is good, we're golden”?!? (It's that uncomfortable-sounding process of “coming forth as gold” that makes us a little nervous... On the other hand, when we consider the saints as “golden,” we might quickly exclude ourselves; “‘Saint’ can't describe me, then—my life's a mess, a struggle!”)

Alas for our ease, the saints' blessedness in these passages implies being on the right road, headed in the right (that is, God's) direction; it has little to do with the carefree, suffering-free “happiness” that our world prefers. Moreover, each text reveals that God's love and blessing don't guarantee our ease, our carefree, suffering-free “happiness.” In fact, they seem to imply the opposite. So don't give up on yourselves as saints!

Our psalm, an acrostic of alternating testimony and exhortation, falls under the category of individual praise psalm. Beginning with praise and personal testimony, the psalmist moves to calling God's holy ones to continue in reverence and fear of the Lord. He invites the listeners to

trust God's goodness enough to try by their own experience, to "taste and see." Yet note, in his testimony: *this poor soul cried out, needing to be saved from trouble. He sought the LORD for deliverance from many fears.* "Taking refuge" describes what the harried and hounded do, not those for whom all is "golden."

In our Revelation passage the Revelator shares with us his vision of the control center of heaven. As in our psalm, praise takes center stage, praise *to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb.* This *great multitude robed in white*, great beyond numbering, *from every nation*, tribe, people and language, worships. They join, as do we every Sunday, "with angels and archangels and all the inhabitants of heaven," in honor and adoration. Then an elder from near God's throne explains who this multitude is: these are *they who are coming out of the great ordeal.* Not only have they experienced hunger, and thirst, and lack of shelter, but also martyrdom, or at least persecution. Not exactly "golden!" They need the guidance of the Shepherd-Lamb; they have wept, and need God's loving care in wiping away those tears.

Or let's consider the Beatitudes, from our Gospel reading. Jesus, shown by Matthew as another Moses, teaches on the mountain. Unlike the revelation through Moses, this comes in the indicative, not the imperative—not a prescriptive set of new commandments, but a description of God's priorities, God's perspective on who really is "golden." In God's reality, within God's "circle of influence," or kingdom, values differ radically from the world's. Everything's turned on its head! Astonishingly, the poor in spirit, not the wealthy, are blessed, privileged, on the right road, in God's zone—they own the kingdom of heaven; ditto with those persecuted for righteousness' sake. The mourners will receive God's comfort. (Sounds like Revelation, doesn't it?!—and divine filling of the hungry and thirsty shows up too). The meek will get the earth, instead of being stomped into it. Instead of being played and taken advantage of, the merciful will receive mercy. Makes no sense in this world, where we want to be safely and comfortably "golden." How can we rejoice and be glad about being reviled and persecuted—how can we wrap our heads around this counter-cultural perspective? Jesus reveals this perspective of God's, not only in his words but with his life. He enacts these kingdom values—and what happened to him?

Notice the changes in tense in most of these assertions. From God's perspective, *the pure in heart are blessed*, privileged, on the right road, in God's zone now. Then the change in tense: *they will see God.* Likewise *the peacemakers* are already *blessed* now, but their being *called the children of God* will happen in the future. The suffering may indeed happen now, to the blessed; it is in God's future that God's rule, already real, will be reestablished on earth as it is in heaven. As one pastor has put it: *The future tense confesses that the world is not currently as the Beatitudes describe it. However, someday it will be!*

*Look!*, begins our Epistle text. Look we should, it's glorious! Attend to the amazing *love the Father has given us*, poured out lavishly in the past with ongoing implications for the future—poured out purposefully, *in order that we should be called God's children.* Did you catch the nuance? This doesn't say simply (and more straightforwardly) "just" that God loves us, but that God's *love is given us.* We are beloved, adopted, AND God's own love, imparted, given to us, enables us to share the family likeness, the family habit of loving! What blessing!!! Then, to underscore our identity as loved and loving children of God, it repeats: *that is what we are!* Again (to erase any lingering doubt): *Beloved, we are God's children now.* Here's that already/not yet emphasis: we are already God's children, and, *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. That's privilege, that's blessing!!!*

But the present suffering shows up here, too: *the world does not know us—it did not know him* either. Eugene Peterson puts it this way: *the world doesn't recognize us or take us seriously, because it has no idea who he is or what he's up to.* Again, not exactly “golden.” Flannery O'Connor had it right when she tweaked John's Gospel to quip—or maybe warn—*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd*; we saints, children of God, find that Jesus Who is the Truth, our Savior and Elder Brother, makes us, from the world's perspective, “odd.”

Does God then require that we suffer, that we might “come forth as gold”? No, we Wesleyans don't believe that, any more than we believe that God required Jesus to suffer. Nor do we believe that God ordains our suffering. Rather, in this broken world suffering happens. Let's face it, life's NOT “golden.”

Sometimes suffering just happens—we encounter, as humans do, trouble, fears and need for refuge. We might hunger, thirst, and shiver. Certainly as mortals we will grieve and weep, experiencing death and pain as senseless and overwhelming. As God's beloved, the saints, those in Christ, we aren't exempt from the struggles of life in God's not-yet healed creation.

Sometimes our suffering happens because we are God's set apart ones, living at cross-purposes to the world. When ignored or dismissed, we persist in the love that God has given us; we trust that we are the beloved. We accept and pass on that divine love that is imparted to us, in order that we might become God's loving as well as beloved children. When encountering active hostility and opposition—reviled, persecuted and slandered—we trust Jesus' assurances of God's perspective; we persist in the peacemaking of the children of God. We rejoice that God names us blessed already, even though we do not yet see the Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Whatever our situation of suffering, God REDEEMS it. God seizes the moment (a far cry from orchestrating it!) and uses it, that we all might “come forth as gold.” Or, in other words, that we might be conformed to the image of God's Son, and so our Elder Brother, Jesus. Our family likeness is intensified by God's grace at work in us. As we saints respond to God's love given us, with God's love given us, that grace makes us, if you will, more “saintly!” We do come forth as gold!

No, we can't exclude ourselves from sainthood on the basis of our struggles, of our less-than-golden lives. We testify with gratitude that we are made saints, made God's children by and because of God's initiative, God's gift of love. And on this All Saints Sunday we come with joy to the Table, especially aware that we stand in company with the communion of saints that includes *all the inhabitants of heaven*, honoring and adoring God's glorious name. In that strong name, the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!