

All Saints Day – Kat Westbrook

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

All Saints Day is a time in the life of the congregation to attend to dimensions of the faith often neglected or relegated. For a church that exists in a consumeristic society, a culture that is so present-oriented, a country that is so eager to forget the past and so unwilling to face what seems like an uncertain future—for those who see these ills, the themes of this day are needed. All Saints Day points us to a posture of reflection and guides us to look beyond individualism. When we look inward we begin to see more distinctly that which we have become, but also we can see where we should be going. When this happens corporately, the individualistic aspect of American culture is cut off at the knees. To be reflective as a community we are allowing ourselves space to grow faithfully and to build faithfully.

This day also reminds us of our connectedness to a great company of God's people. This reminder gives us great strength to remember the lives of those who were known to us, but also honor those who have been unknown. The themes of the texts for today, that are in tandem with All Saints Day, are giving the Church body the power to reshape our identity, to teach us who we are and what we are about. The texts are speaking clearly in conveying that this great company, this heavenly host, this body of saints is a community singularly focused on God. And let that be the subject of our self-reflection, and let that be our tether against individualism. After our remembrance of All Saints Day today, let us not forget that, corporately, we are a body that is striving to be singularly focused on God. After our remembrance of All Saints Day today, let us not forget that, through our liturgy, worship, speech, education, and actions, we need to be a body that is singularly focused on God. Just as the saints, throughout the ages have conveyed to us this theme of focus, let us, also, not forget that we are Children of God, and that we are focusing on our heavenly Father.

In 1 John 3, verse 2, the author makes a point to address God's children directly as *beloved*; this adoration is an emphatic affirmation of our current status as God's children. So we already know that this is a loving address. (I'm not sure about anyone else, but whenever my mother or father started a sentence with "Honey," or "Darling" there was a feeling of discomfort, because the information coming to me would either be a request for something I did not want to do, or a correction of my current behavior.)

Further on in verse two, the author is giving a mysterious instruction that insinuates a coming transformation, in saying *we will be like him*—that is to say, that what we are now is not how we will be. And in verse three the text says, *and all who have this hope (of becoming like him) in him purify themselves, just as he is pure*. The thought that we will be like him has given hope of a future transformation. And that future reality should lead us to start transforming ourselves now, in the present.

Even though the saints have died, through their instruction and correction, their honesty and humility, their sacrifice and dedication, and, most of all, their faith, they are still speaking. They are communicating in a way that allows for the Church to re-evaluate and reshape that which will be done and that which can be done in light of knowing that we will be like Christ. The saints that have gone before us have set examples in their life to show us what devotion and sacrifice and revolution look like. They have set examples for us to see how this transformation can start, and, in a faithful journey, where it can take us.

To start this: there is a need, as said before, for reflection and contemplation. This reflection, this self-evaluation form, is typed up for us in the Matthew text. The Beatitudes are describing to the listeners, both then and now, the nature of the kingdom. It is showing us the characteristics of our citizenship within the kingdom. It is laying out guidance to begin true conversion. Jesus quite literally is giving us (as a very rare occurrence), explicit instructions for our discipleship—instructions on how to become disciples and how to be citizens of the kingdom.

The Jewish population in 1st century Palestine were desperately and hopefully awaiting the promised Messiah, a Messiah of power and political tenacity. They are searching because, as Matthew informs us at the beginning of the Gospel, this story begins with not only the birth of the long-awaited Messiah but with murder. Some curious sages' traveling from the East to pay homage to the newborn King, in Matthew 2, leads the ruler at the time, King Herod, to launch a massacre of all infants in the region. There is also a prophet, a scruffy dude who lives in the desert, and eats insects—goes by the name of John. He is a prophet that is preparing the way, giving prophecy saying the one to come is *one more powerful than I*. (3:11) He is saying the one to come is powerful enough to bring justice on the wicked. This Gospel is opened to us in bloodshed, the cries of a people, and the anticipation of a mighty overthrow.

In chapter 5 when Jesus, voted most likely Messiah by John, does speak, the first words out of his mouth are, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* (5:1-3)

The long-awaited Messiah had arrived, and he came to Galilee and built hospitals, spoke on pacifism, talked about giving everything to anyone, had street tussles with the authorities, stood next to those who had been marked as other, fed those in his company, and answered violence with prayer.

Let us then reflect on how we are living out our discipleship. Let us playfully imagine our lives today, our town right now in the lens of what the Gospel text has told us.

Let us envision, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* (5:7-9)

After that, let us then with hope enact all we have seen from the Beatitudes. Let us gather our strength and audacity to build the hospitals, to not hit back, to be people of empathy, to be with those marked as other, to call out our authorities, to feed those who are hungry, and to always answer the violence with fervent prayer.

This re-calibration of what we have, a critical look at what the church has been doing until this point, is a foundational part of our transformation. The criticism of our past and note-taking of our tradition is what helps guide us even further into discipleship—and ultimately into the greater company at the throne.

Our Revelation text lays this out quite beautifully. Its words describe so poetically what this great company will be like.

This book is part of a literary genre called apocalyptic literature. Although there is fire, and thunder, and a really pale guy on a horse at one point, this book was not written to scare people but to comfort them. The book of Revelation inspires hope for a better world. It offers an image of communal worship and thanksgiving that is tied together with equity and justice and the presence of God.

In our passage, there is a *multitude* before the throne, verse 9 says, *that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*. All of this diversity was robed in white, robed in the purity that is talked about in 1st John.

The future company at the throne is bringing us hope in the now. And we see that here. We see that we will be robed in white and in victory, with branches in our hands. We see the new creation that we will be in Christ.

This text is masterfully giving us a glimpse of what is to come, a glimpse into the matters of heaven. Who knows what heaven will truly be like? But to say it is anything different than being surrounded by a multitude of diversity, robed in white, standing at the throne of God in victory, singing praises, would be the wrong move.

Verse 14 also lets us know that those there will be coming from a great ordeal and situations of suffering. But later in verses 15-17 we are informed again that, for that very reason, because of the suffering and the great ordeals, those there are before the throne of God. We are told that the great company will hunger no more, and that *every tear* will be wiped away *from their eyes*. (17) In these few verses we are shown aspects of heaven, who will be in the company, and the benefits of it.

In being given this, we, as the Church, should feel assured and ready to engage the world and not be afraid, because shelter is ours already. In this we should engage the world to be disciples and begin our transformation. In this we should begin to work to bring to fruition our coming future: to be agents of continuing diversity in the kingdom, to not shy away from the great ordeals or the sufferings, to be confident in what our Scriptures are telling us today.

Throughout all of this reflection, and with reflection to come, whether in bold with neon around it or maybe more subtly, these texts are pushing us to engage the world, and not be idle while in it. Being a disciple and knowing of the future reality of being a disciple should bring us to a place of willingness to be just as Christ was: to build hospitals, to lead charges, to sit with those marked as other, to give abundantly.

To follow these lessons, to learn from the saints, to hear the stories of the martyrs, to listen to the cries of the people, all of this comes to us, speaks to us, calls us to action, and transforms us. All of this guides us to be fully who we are designed to be in Christ. So let us reflect. And let us not be idle.