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THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

November 5, 2017

Let us pray: Everlasting God, we remember with inexpressible joy and gratitude your saints departed, from every time and place, countless, who have lived and died in you, and now sing blessing, honor, glory, and thanksgiving around your throne forever and ever. We pray in the Name of Christ, the Head of the Church, the communion of saints. Amen.

Perhaps most of us, when we hear the word "counter-culture," if we're old enough, as I certainly am, think of those hippies and peace-niks from the 60's. Dictionary.com defines counter-culture in this way: "the culture and lifestyle of those people...who reject or oppose the dominant values and behavior of society."

As I read these beloved Beatitudes with which Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount, some of the best-known verses in Scripture, "counter-culture" came to mind. These Beatitudes most certainly "oppose the dominant values and behavior of society" of whatever time or place. Notice first that the people Jesus calls "blessed" are definitely not the people the culture views as such. Those who are mourning rather than happy. Those who are meek rather than powerful. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness rather than for wealth, prestige, and domination. Those who make peace by returning evil with good, and turning the other cheek. Absurd; not worldly values for sure! But here Jesus is inviting us to imagine what it's like to live in the kingdom of God. Jesus is calling us away from our allegiance to the kingdom of this world. The values and priorities of God's kingdom, they are to inform our whole life, our Monday to Saturday world, our politics, our stewardship, our yearning for justice, civility, tranquility, and the dignity of every person.

As we mourn today our beloved dead, saints departed, these Beatitudes are promises that give us comfort and hope and the will to go on. As we remember the dead who died at the hands of hatred and violence, the Beatitudes are promises that remind us how distant righteousness really is and how truly thirsty for righteousness we should be. These days as anti-Beatitude living becomes more acceptable, more normalized, more regularized, the Beatitudes call us out of our complacency and conformity. They are counter-cultural for sure. "Do not be conformed to this world," Paul preaches, "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that...you may discern what is the will of God!" As we continue to experience the effects of national and global trauma, of natural and human-made disaster, these Beatitudes are promises we can believe in, count on, and trust. As we exploit and abuse the creation, the Beatitudes insist that God's good earth deserves justice also. As the world loves its walls and revels in exclusion, these counter-cultural Beatitudes call us to become bridge builders, advocates of equal justice for all, to be God's ambassadors of welcoming inclusion. As priests and politicians call upon the sacred name of God to justify their speech and actions, and yet disregard and displace the very persons Jesus loved, and continues to love so much, these Beatitudes are clear: we must practice what we preach! As we hear and take to heart Jesus' words of blessedness, that those who humble themselves will be exalted, the Savior calls us to lift burdens not inflict them, to liberate those who bear the weights of the world: the oppressed, the vulnerable, the excluded, and whoever is in need. The Savior Christ is counter-cultural for sure!

I like to think of the first four Beatitudes in this way: how fortunate for the unfortunate, God is on their side. And summarizing the last four Beatitudes: how fortunate for those who care for the unfortunate, for they are on God's side! The saints we today celebrate, those who have gone before us, even now rejoicing around the throne of God, they knew by faith, amid their every ordeal, that God was on their side, and in living out their faith, they were on God's side! All the saints we honor today have been and are the children of God, defenders of the faith, who know they have been commissioned by God to embody the counter-cultural values of God's Kingdom.

Now let's be clear, the word "saint" is not limited to the "greats" of the New Testament and the big names of the church's history, not limited to those depicted in stained-glass windows, like John the Baptist up there. St. Paul and other New Testament writers use the term "saint" synonymously with "Christian," or "believer." You, I, our departed loved ones, warts, flaws, failings and all, have, nonetheless, by grace, have been, nonetheless, deemed by God to be numbered among the saints for no other reason than the fact we have been redeemed by Christ's cross and resurrection triumph. Nowhere in the Bible does "saint" refer to a person of obvious virtue. And so St. Paul addresses the church in Corinth as the "saints," even though his letters to Corinth offer abundant testimony that the Christians there were anything but poster children for moral excellence. So too, you and I are saints solely because God's Spirit is alive and at work in us.

This week Rob and I have been surrounded by the saints, uplifted, undergirded, encouraged, prayed over, served, and, for sure, utterly inspired by genuinely caring saints of God! I cannot begin to imagine how any person can get through the challenge, anxiety, and stress we have undergone this past week without the support of the fellowship of saints. You, in countless ways, have incarnated the love of God for Rob and me. My texting finger is sore, what a joy!, in answering just your texts, too many to number. Prayers, visits, cards, emails, calls, casseroles, and texts, we have been warmly embraced by God through the saints of God!

At this Feast of All Saints, I would be remiss if I failed to give further attention our beloved saints departed, whether they departed this life this past year or five, twenty, or forty years ago, those you continue to remember, cherish, and mourn. For the blessed hope and assurance of their future, their safety, their wholeness, their joy, their life unending, we must turn to today's First Reading, to St. John's witness to the unconditional grace and faithfulness of God in leading our loved ones departed through death's dark valley to the perpetual light, and love, and life of the Father's House, where there is no more hunger, no more thirst, no more disease, or dis-ease, no more death! So close your eyes for a moment and picture your loved ones: robes white as snow, washed in Christ's sacrificial blood, palm branches in their hands, rejoicing everlastingly before the throne of God and the Lamb...all tears wiped away by resurrection power. We are comforted in the certain promise that all is well with them! In the meantime, as we await our reunion with them, Jesus knows our struggles and any grief which weighs down our hearts, for he has borne them on the cross and bears them with us even now.

Again this Lord's Day we gather around this One who was, by the world's measure, an absolute loser and foolish victim, rejected by the prominent, executed by the powerful. Yet this One, God's Son, God raised from death, vindicating meekness and mercy, validating the light and love Jesus incarnated. Risen from the dead, this Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief, our grief, comes to us anew in bread and wine as the King of kings, pictured in the center window up there, at whose feet the kingdoms of this world, indeed, all human history will end. All the saints, yours and mine too, join us with Jesus at this Feast of life, singing perpetually: "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" So come, let us join with all the saints, past and present, from every place at this Banquet of grace and, yes, this Banquet of sainthood! So, come, "taste and see that the Lord is good," indeed!

† *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*