

Blessings and Woes for All Saints
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan - November 6, 2022 (All Saints)

Please Read:
Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18
Luke 6:20-31

Once upon a time, there were two evil brothers. They were rich and used their money to keep their ways from the public eye. They even attended the same church and looked to be perfect Christians. A new pastor came who could see right through the brothers' deception. He also spoke the truth, and the church started to swell in numbers. A fund-raising campaign was started to build a new sanctuary.

One of the brothers died. The remaining brother met the pastor before the funeral and handed him a check for the amount needed to finish the new building. "I have only one condition," he said. "At his funeral, you must say my brother was a saint." The pastor gave his word and deposited the check.

The next day at the funeral, the pastor did not hold back. "He was an evil man" he said. "He cheated on his wife, abused his family, swindled his friends and the poor... but, *compared to his brother*, he was a saint."

We laugh because none of us here would call ourselves a saint. We know we have flaws. We have done evil, or let it slide. Part of what we reflect on today as All Saints' Day is not only those who have gone before us, but those who will come after us, and how God calls us to make choices to pursue a better life and a fairer world for all. We need the wisdom of those who have gone before us and find the courage to do what is good and just, because there is a lot of evil in our world.

Things could be worse, though. In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Daniel was one of the Jewish exiles carted off to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. He faced political pressures from within and without. He was literally thrown to the lions, and in our text today we read that he had visions of the future and of political leaders that terrified him! Maybe some of you can relate?

You can read more about the complex history of the Babylonian Empire, how King Belshazzar was the last King, before King Cyrus of the Persians took over. Cyrus allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem... only for the Greek leader Antiochus Epiphanies IV to desecrate the temple in the second century B.C.E., succeeded by the Roman Emperor Vespasian whose son Titus would finally raze Jerusalem to the ground in 70 C.E. There have been too many beastly leaders and empires who have oppressed and persecuted the Jews over the centuries.

The important point that God spoke through the vision of Daniel is that there are hideous dynasties and kingdoms of this world, but there is only one Kingdom of God, and God's reign, God's vision of justice, compassion and humility for all will endure forever. Here is news that is disorienting, unlikely yet strangely attractive.

This text is *apropos* on All Saints because we wonder who will be part of this heavenly kingdom? The vision of Daniel states that "the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom..." The first thing to note is that the Hebrew word here is not *hassidim* which would normally be translated "holy ones." *Hassidim* means "pious" or "kind" ones and using this word would imply that the Kingdom of God is reserved for those who are particularly virtuous, whether religiously or socially. The word used here, in fact, is *qadôsh*, which simply means "set apart."

In other words, saints aren't just those who have gone before us. *We* are made saints, God's holy ones, not by virtue of who we are or what we do, as much as by who God has called us to be and what God can accomplish in and through us. Alan Jones describes saints as those who "have been allowed to see into themselves and have not refused to look."¹ We are a people on the way, a work in progress!

Which brings us to our Gospel text, Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount and a list of blessings and woes. For Luke though, it's not a sermon on the *mount*, but a sermon on the *plain*. Unlike Matthew's version where Jesus went *up*, here, Luke writes, Jesus "came *down* with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon." Indeed, Luke writes that "power came out from him and healed all of them" (Luke 6:17-19, selected).

This text reminds us that following the way of God, that is, *aligning our power with God's priorities*, is not without suffering. There are blessings and woes for all the saints.

Let's start with the woes. Death is something we have in solidarity with all people. No one is exempt from death, loss, or grief. All Saints' Day reminds us all that from dust we have come and to dust we shall return. Today we remember and give thanks that we are part of a long parade of people who have gone before us and who will come after us, and how mysteriously God can bring new life even from the dead. I appreciate how Kathleen McTigue puts it in her poem, "They Are with Us Still":

¹ Christine Valters Paintner, *The Soul's Slow Ripening*, p. 57-58.

*In the struggles we choose for ourselves,
in the ways we move forward in our lives
and bring our world forward with us,
It is right to remember the names of those
who gave us strength in this choice of living.
It is right to name the power of hard lives well-lived.
We share a history with those lives.
We belong to the same motion.
They too were strengthened by what had gone before.
They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.
Those who lived before us,
who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us,
have not melted into the dust, and have not disappeared.
They are with us still.
The lives they lived hold us steady.
Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.
Their courage and love evoke our own.
We, the living, carry them with us:
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.
We take them with us,
and with them choose the deeper path of living.*

We acknowledge death, and remember those who have gone before us, so that we can better focus on how then shall we live with the time we have...

Note that Jesus teaches that *because we choose to follow him*, we can expect our share of hardship, persecution, and rejection. This is because we too are called to follow the way of self-giving love, the way of the cross.

There are a number of disturbing counter-intuitive assertions here in Jesus' sermon. Jesus was challenging the thinking that if you are rich, then you are blessed by God, that if you are poor, you are cursed by God. Jesus says it doesn't work like that in his community. What is important is not what your position is in society, but rather *how you position yourself toward others*.

Jesus recalibrates all ethical norms by commanding us to show love even to our enemies. In other words, the real metric to evaluate your holiness is not more religious rituals, but more redeeming relationships, particularly showing love and compassion even to those who hate or revile you. You are to treat others as you

would have them treat you. There is a special blessing, according to Jesus, when we give up our lives for the sake of God's love and compassion.

As we move toward another election day, I laughed reading the cynical meme attributed to Mark Twain, "If voting made any difference, they wouldn't let us do it."² It makes us laugh nervously because there has been so much undermining of the integrity of our elections. We believe in this country that everyone should have a vote, and that every vote should count. And this is an important blessing of *All Saints Day*. We can have an impact on our world and make a difference for those who will come after us, our children and our children's children. And so, we look to our "balcony people"; those people either from centuries ago, or more recent family or friends, to whom we look for advice and counsel. And I encourage all of us to vote on Tuesday, and to ask our balcony people for wisdom and grace to move forward together as fellow citizens, come what may.

Finally, friends, maybe compared to some others we may look like saints, but deep down we know we are not holy on our own merit. The good news is that God comes down into the midst of us all, saints and sinners, rich and poor alike. We are sanctified, set apart, by God's life-giving Spirit, poured out for us freely. We are made "saints" by what God has done for us that we could not do for ourselves... And we also know that God calls us forward to new life, to love our enemies, and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We know we have a responsibility to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God and pursue a better life and fairer world for all people.

So, as we prepare to receive from the Lord's table, to join in this communion of saints, take a moment to reflect on those who have gone before us, but who still meet us here. Come, eat, drink, and be filled by grace. This table is for you. It is for all the saints and sinners, the righteous and the rogues - the thieves, the adulterers, the drunkards and cons; all those whom God loves and sets apart for new life. Here is grace to strengthen us to live as the saints we are called to be...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. AMEN.

I invite you now to affirm the faith that we have received. Let us stand and say what we believe, using the Apostles' Creed printed in your bulletins...

² Referenced November 5, 2022: <https://marktwainstudies.com/the-apocryphal-twain-if-voting-made-any-difference-they-wouldnt-let-us-do-it/>; In a 2008 interview with The Nation, Father Daniel Berrigan attributes its origin to his brother, Father Phillip Berrigan.

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.