

All Saints' Day
November 1, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

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

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

I sing a song of the saints of God ...



We sing that song in just about every Episcopal Church on every All Saints' Day celebration – certainly in every Episcopal Church I've had the privilege of serving for over 30 years now.

A few days ago, I sang the song for a video I made for the kids of Trinity – to help them (and us) get ready for this morning. And I'll come back to that song in a moment ...

But first, a word about this morning's gospel ... Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the "Beatitudes."

In Matthew, this isn't just one sermon among others. No, this is the first time Jesus speaks publicly to a crowd, and that makes this Jesus' inaugural address. Jesus here is laying out a vision of how he sees the world and the people he deems "blessed."

The crowds that followed Jesus up a mountain that day were desperate. Matthew is explicit about that. Matthew says that the people who came after Jesus "were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics ..." (Matthew 4:24).

Jesus has not drawn society's "cream of the crop," the people with the wherewithal to get things done. No, by the standards of his day, he is collecting the riff-raff, the refuse, the sorts of people those in charge are inclined to overlook if at all possible. They'd rather not deal with them.

Most everybody – themselves included, themselves probably most of all – would have called these people "pathetic." But Jesus calls them, one and all, from start to finish, "blessed."

So Jesus cannot mean what most of us would mean by the word. His list of those "blessed" does not line up at all with any list of what most any of us would wish for ourselves (or for any of our friends or family). I wish for you – and for me – blessings such as these:

- good health;
- prosperity;
- a warm bed at night;

- a full refrigerator;
- a hot supper;
- love;
- good friends;
- safety;
- security ...

Now to be clear, I don't think Jesus wants any less for any of us.

But take some care not to make it mean more than it is. The danger, you see, is that if our good fortune is what we think it means to be "blessed," then it's a short trip to suggesting that those who are sick, those who are not prosperous, those who been sidelined by circumstance (or beaten down by others with more power and less shame) ... it's a short trip from our way of thinking about who is blessed to determining who among us is not blessed, who among us are God-forsaken, and not beloved of God.

But Jesus, right from the start, says that when all else – and everybody else – deems them cursed, they are blessed. Jesus says to them:

I see you.

I see you ... dangling there at the end of your rope.

I see you ... and your broken heart.

I see you ... and your quiet hesitancy.

I see you ... and your longing for a better world, for justice that seems like it will never come.

And I say to you, you are blessed.

And because this is Jesus speaking, Jesus is telling them – and us – that God sees them too, that God loves them – and that God blesses them, as well.

And that's not the end of the story, it's just the beginning. Because in the biblical tradition, the tradition inherited by Jesus and passed on to us, God's blessing is given not so that we can sit back and bask in our newfound blessedness. No, God blesses us so that we can be a blessing for others.

And it's a short trip from there to calling us saints of God. And so, to go back to where I began:

I sing a song of the saints of God ...



Who are these saints?

What makes them saints of God? Well, the blessing of God for a start. And living to be a blessing as well.

*And one was a doctor, and one was a queen,
And one was a shepherdess on the green:
They were all of them saints of God – and I mean,
God helping, to be one too.*

Doctors deserve to be on a list of God's saints. We should all sing songs that give thanks for what they do. And while we're at it, we should sing songs in praise of nurses, too – and all manner of health care workers and frontline responders:

- EMTs;
- and aides;
- and the folks who sit at the front desk to welcome patients;
- and respiratory therapists;
- and all those – especially in a time of pandemic – who put themselves at risk for the health and wellbeing of others.

The thing of it is, though, the song isn't talking about all the saints of God who practice medicine. There's a particular physician in mind: Saint Luke – "Luke the Physician," we sometimes call him (and it may very well be that he was a physician) but we remember him – and this morning sing a song about him – because he is "Luke the Evangelist." We celebrate him as the author one of the four gospels. We give thanks for his particular point of emphasis, because he especially tells us about Jesus' concern for those on the margins.

We cannot all be doctors. But we can all tell about God's love for those easily ignored.

And there are stories like that for all those we sing about in that "song of the saints of God." It occurs to me that this children's saint song tells the stories all a bit sideways. On the face of it, it's a sweet song extolling ordinary virtues, but the saints themselves undercut the supposed virtue. Girls might want to grow and be a queen and boys might imagine being soldiers, but the saints themselves are remembered for something else.

"... and one was a queen." It might sound like a song that indulges in romantic notions of kings and queens and princesses and princes, ignoring that truth that those who wear crowns and sit on thrones have far too often abused the power and wealth they possessed but did not earn.

Our song is not about regal regalia, but about Queen Margaret, revered and remembered for her work to found schools and hospitals and orphanages: that the least in society be cared for.

We did not inherit royal privilege. But we can all use the privilege we have inherited to bless others.

And one was a shepherdess on the green. We might imagine a rural peasant girl, raised close to nature and blessed with an innate connection to God and all of God's creation.

But the shepherdess in the song is one we remember as Joan of Arc. Barbara Brown Taylor says of her: "She preferred armor to petticoats and puzzled everyone by dressing like a man, but the voices of her critics were nothing compared to the voice of God in her head." ⁱ

I wouldn't trust a voice that tells you or me to wage war in order to end conflict. But I would ask you to listen for the voice of God that tells you who you truly are (and not to settle for roles others assigned to you by the voices of the wider culture).

There's a second verse, much like the first:

*And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
And one was slain by a fierce wild beast ...*

In the U.S., we have civil holidays to honor soldiers: Veterans Day to honor all who have served in the military; Memorial Day to remember those who gave their lives to protect us.

But this soldier in our "song of the saints" is revered for ending his military career in order to begin another vocation. Martin saw a poor, shivering, naked beggar one day. And he got down off his high horse. He tore his fine cloak in half and gave that half away – because he saw the face of Christ in the face of the beggar. And then he laid down his sword for good. "I am Christ's soldier," he said, "I am not allowed to fight."

We are not all born with swords in our hands. But we can all seek the ways that make for peace.

And one was a priest. Clergy have no corner on holiness. Trust me on this one. I have known a lot of clergy over the years: priests, yes; and deacons and bishops, too. Not all of us are saints.

In any event, we sing of song of the saints of God not in praise of good clergy but of one priest in particular: John Donne, priest and preacher and poet. He lived and preached during several waves of plague in 17th century London. He is perhaps best remembered not for setting himself apart from others, but for reminding us all that:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

We do not all preach or write poetry. But we must affirm the bonds of our common humanity.

And one was slain by a fierce wild beast. There was a time – once upon a time (long, long ago) – when the followers of Jesus were subject to horrors we can scarcely imagine. There were times, yes, when Christians were thrown to fierce wild beasts in the Coliseum for entertainment.

We've lost track of them all, but we remember some still. One of those Ignatius of Antioch – and, yes, he was martyred in the Coliseum early in 2nd century Rome. We celebrate his memory not merely for the death that ended him, but for the life he lived. And he lives on in the letters he wrote, testifying to the holy hope that love would prove stronger than death.

We all die in the end. But in the meantime we can live to speak of the love that sustains us.

We sing the song and we tell the tales not just to remember those who have gone before. We sing the song and we tell the tales because they are our stories, as well:

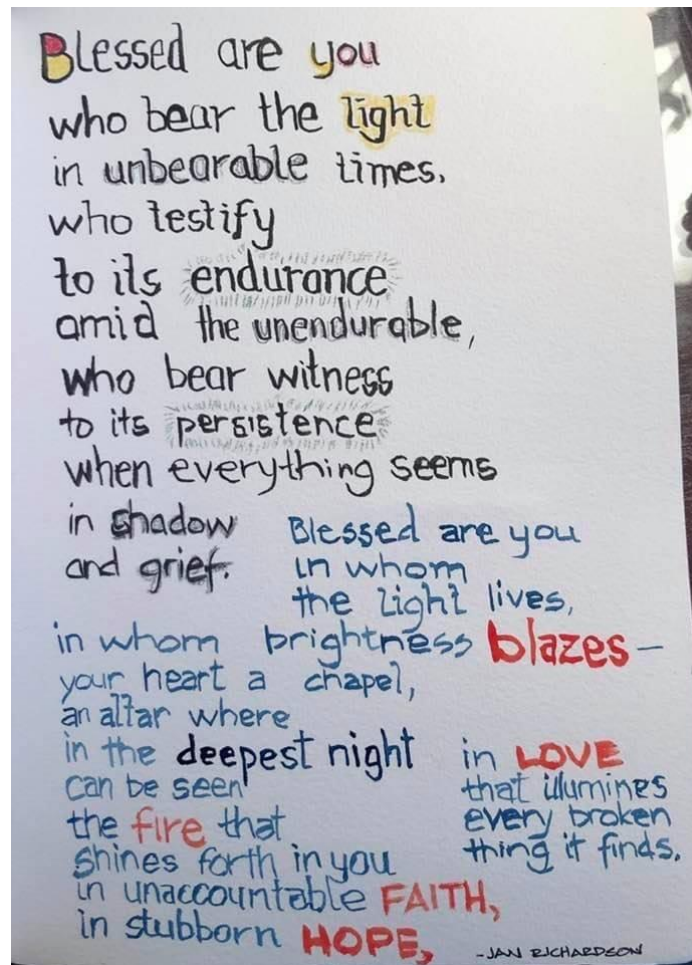
*You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
In church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea,
For the saints of God are just folk like me,
And I mean to be one too.*

Jesus reminds us this morning that God is at work in the world blessing all sorts of people – even folk like me and you. Blessing us that we might be a blessing too.

And that's what makes saints of us all. We, the baptized of God – we, the blessed of God – sing a song of the saints of God to remember the saints of old – and even more to resolve to be one too:

- with Luke the Evangelist to speak of God's particular concern for those on the margins of society;
- with Queen Margaret to put to use the gifts we have received for the relief of human need;
- with Joan of Arc to listen for the voice of God who calls us to be who we truly are;
- with Martin of Tours to seek the ways that make for peace in this world,
- with John Donne to affirm the bonds of our common humanity; and
- with Ignatius of Antioch to proclaim – by the life we live – the good news of God's love.

So I end this morning one of those wonderful blessings by preacher, writer, and poet Jan Richardson: a couple more beatitudes, words of blessing for you, the saints of God:



¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Handkerchiefs," *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, 1999), p. 208.