

Psalm 149  
Ephesians 1: 15-23  
Luke 6: 20-31

Remembering with Regret, Joy and Hope  
November 3, 2013  
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Some of us, particularly those who live in downtown areas, recently experienced the onslaught of Halloween. At least, it can feel like an onslaught, a chore, or an extended party, depending on your point of view. For me, especially in years past, it was mostly about checking out the beautifully creative costumes at the Norwich Inn. When those young costumed folk come to the door and get their goodies, we often hear the accompanying adult give them the reminder, "Say thank you." And so the younger voices echo "Thank you" as they grab their loot: kind of a responsive litany of the street on October 31. It is just such a clear example of something we all know: thankfulness, gratitude has to be taught and nurtured...it doesn't come naturally to us at birth. In the church, we see this as part of our spiritual formation.

Today, we take a particular view of gratitude, as it is All Saints Sunday. Many centuries ago, it was felt that the worshipping church should honor and express gratitude for all those who died as witnesses to the Christian faith. There were so many of them (some whose names no one remembered) that each one could not have their own feast day. Over the years, we have kept the holiday, but returned to the original meaning of a "martyr" as a witness, and of a "saint" as one who loved his or her God. Saints are people who have somehow been touched by God's grace, and whose strong faith is consistent with their behavior. Today we thank God for those people, in song, in words of Scripture, in word and in prayer.

And, today, I want to look at this celebration as a way of understanding our spiritual formation. We have been formed by our experiences and our relationships to be who we are. In some ways, we have been formed by the saints: by meeting them, by hearing stories about them, by trying to follow their example. And this is a great blessing. In the letter to the Ephesians, we hear of this. The writer has heard stories about the church folks in Ephesus, and commends them for their love towards all the saints and for their faith. Then he goes on to pray they would receive a spirit of wisdom, so that "with the eyes of your heart enlightened" they may know hope. I love that phrase: "with the eyes of your heart enlightened." This kind of knowledge is a true understanding of our place in the world, of our identity as beloved children of God, as inheritors with the saints of God's power, and of our role as the church, the body of Christ.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we do not see the world through rose-colored glasses. The fact is, some of us were formed by negative experiences, broken relationships, faulty parenting, and tragedy. Even as we remember and honor those who have gone before us, when we see with clear eyes, we cannot affirm their saintliness in the sense of purity, or infallibility. Our departed loved ones have formed us, complete with regret, joy, and hope, and we cannot always tease apart this web of love and pain.

Just to reinforce this conundrum of remembering today, we also get to hear Luke's version of the beatitudes, with their blessings and woes. This is not a comfortable reading: even as we

recognize some saints in those who are blessed for poverty, hunger, mourning and persecution, we cringe at the reversals, when people who are comfortable can expect the opposite. And then, by the way, here is a to-do list that is unbelievably daunting: love your enemies, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, give all your clothes away, etc., etc. Thanks, Luke. I like Matthew version better.

But, as I read this with the eyes of my heart enlightened (hopefully) I see that this is not a to-do list, and the blessing and woes are not a “how-to-get-into heaven” list. It is more of a picture, a set of values, a corrective to the wisdom of the world. We are not supposed to hear “Blessed are those who weep now,” and then somehow find a way to make ourselves sad. Instead we might ask, “What would the world look like, what would we look like, if we were part of God’s blessing on those who weep, or hunger, or experience exclusion?”

And perhaps the only way for us to imagine that world is to tell stories of saints: not just St. Francis (though there are wonderful stories about him) or Mother Teresa (though stories about her are inspiring) or Nelson Mandela (though he may embody Luke’s beatitudes in a remarkable way). The faith community exists so that we can tell the less-heard stories, and allow them to teach us, form us, and give us purpose. So let me start you off with a couple of saints whose voices and actions pointed a way.

In South Africa, during the Apartheid era, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana was celebrating communion in one of the “Independent Homelands.” People were hungry and starving. A mother, a black woman, brought her baby to the altar and made to take a communion wafer for the baby. ‘No my daughter!’ said Malusi. ‘You know our tradition. I will bless your baby for you.’ ‘Father,’ said the woman, ‘this piece of bread will be the only food my child eats this weekend. Yet you refuse it, and then you tell us that Jesus is the Bread of Life! For shame!’ This was a conversion experience for Bishop Malusi. He heard the deep truth of what this poor woman said. And the eyes of his heart were enlightened.

Another Christian, a radical activist in the United States, Shaine Claiborne tells the story of a woman he met as she struggled through a crowd to get a meal from the late-night food van in Philadelphia. When he asked whether the meal was worth the effort of the struggle, she replied, “Oh yes, but I don’t eat them myself. I get them for another homeless lady, an elderly woman around the corner who can’t fight for a meal.” The unspoken question for us, of course, is why a saint has to elbow her way through a crowd to feed her homeless neighbor. When we begin to tackle questions like these, maybe the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened.

You could tell me more stories, stories of someone nearer to home that formed you. Some of those stories will be full of regret, some will be joyful, some may give you hope for the church and for the world. But today, on All Saints Sunday, I pray that you will also feel a sense of gratitude. I pray that a spirit of wisdom and enlightenment may lead us to hope. I pray that you choose to contemplate the stories that give life.

Susan White put this beautifully in her sermon 3 weeks ago: “...By the grace of God, and encouraged by the shining examples of so many who have gone before us, gratitude is a choice that this congregation has made throughout its history.” and “Gratitude is the story of this church.”

In that spirit, I offer these words of a hymn written by John Bell, reminiscent of, but slightly different from, our opening hymn:

For all the saints who've shown your love  
In how they live and where they move  
For mindful women, caring men  
Accept our gratitude again.

For all the saints who loved your name  
Whose faith increased the Savior's fame  
Who sang your songs and shared your word  
Accept our gratitude, good Lord.

Amen.