

In Memoriam, 2016 and Beyond
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Last spring, I read an article in Smithsonian Magazine about the grave of Susan B. Anthony in Rochester, New York. As you know, Susan B. Anthony was a 19th century activist on issues of temperance, abolition, and women's rights. In 1872, Anthony was arrested for voting in her hometown of Rochester and convicted in a widely publicized trial. She refused to pay the fine imposed, and, as it turned out, the authorities declined to take further action. In 1878, she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton arranged for Congress to be presented with an amendment giving women the right to vote. The 19th amendment finally became part of the US Constitution in 1920.

Susan B. Anthony had died in 1906, long before the government got around to recognizing voting rights for 50% of the population. 10,000 people showed up to pass by her flag-draped coffin and pay their respects. I am struck by the long arc of her life, and the way her work was not completed at death. Nowadays, a new tradition has sprung up, extending that arc. In the last couple of years, at election time, over a century later, admirers of the suffrage icon, mostly women, have been coming to her grave with a different kind of tribute—dozens of “I Voted” stickers, stuck to the stone, along with flowers on the grave itself. This is a unique kind of praise, a new version of the outpouring of love in 1906. The eulogy spoken at her funeral was prescient: the Reverend Anna Howard Shaw said, “There is no death for such as she.”

Today we recognize two traditions of the church: All Saints Day and All Souls Day, which fall on November 1st and 2nd, respectively. This is a reflective time of year. The night of October 31 comes at the midpoint of fall, halfway between the Autumn equinox and the Winter Solstice. The northern hemisphere is turning towards the dark, and we seem to turn inward, to thoughts of change and endings. The need to mark this time pre-dates Christianity, but the medieval church chose to associate this time with remembering all the saints, known and unknown, and all the faithful departed. To my mind, it is a time to remember all those who made us who we are, whether they lived in the 1st century, the 19th century, or last year.

The Gospel reading for All Saints Day is always one of the versions of Beatitudes, either Matthew's or Luke's. We hear a set of blessings, perhaps a way to frame the faithful life, a way to remember the virtues of those who are gone and a way to be aspirational in the process. I want to start by noting the differences between Matthew's beatitudes, given in the famous Sermon on the Mount; and Luke's version, given in the Sermon on the Plain. Matthew gives us nine blessings. Luke gives us only four, and parallels them with four “woes”, as in “Woe to you who are rich.” Matthew seems to focus more on the spiritual lives of the blessed, while Luke talks in terms of real physical suffering: poverty, hunger, grief, and exclusion. This makes sense. It continues many of the themes of Luke's Gospel: lifting up the lowly, a special concern for outsider groups, and God's preferential option for the poor.

We are given Luke's Beatitudes to ponder in terms of sainthood. What is this blessedness, who are the blessed, and what can we learn about **our** Christian journey from hearing blessings and

woes? It says that Jesus looked directly at his disciples when he spoke these words, so let's imagine that he is looking directly at us. We could read these blessings as a sort of consolation, the comfort offered in terms of The Afterlife. And in many ways, the church has reinforced this interpretation over the centuries. The kingdom of God, promised to the poor, is heaven. The hungry will be filled in heaven, the mourning will be comforted in heaven, and those who are hated and reviled for loyalty to the Son of Man will receive a great reward... in heaven. Consoling the suffering with distant promises can make them more likely to tolerate the present pain. Karl Marx was thinking of these teachings when he wrote, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."

But I want more than opium. I want to learn more from Jesus' sermons. I sometimes need consolation, yes, but not so that I can wait for all good things to happen in heaven. We are called to be saints, as Paul often writes in his letters, and I want to find out how to live into that calling. In the letter to the Ephesians we read, "I pray that... God... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you." I want the eyes of my heart to be enlightened, and to understand my world, today.

Those parallel blessings and woes are striking. Am I to understand, with the eyes of my heart, that God is setting up a kind of class warfare? Is it us against them? Are saints the ones who take up arms on behalf of the poor, the hungry, the grieving and the outcast? Is it our job to effect the promised reversal, cutting the rich down to size? Certainly in the last few decades, some have interpreted the passage this way: it's called liberation theology. The poor and the downtrodden have read the gospel and said, "Yes, God loves us. But God hates the fact that we're poor and powerless. Punishment is coming to the rich. Maybe we should not remain poor and powerless. Maybe this is not God's intention. Those who have been telling us that we are poor because it's God's will have distorted the Gospel. God doesn't want us to be poor. He wants us to fight against it." Pastors and people of faith read the gospels with the same lens and say to themselves, "If God doesn't want these people to be poor, then it's our calling to stand with them against the rich and powerful, to teach a gospel that gives everyone dignity and well-being now." And so we become... revolutionaries.

But maybe the teaching is neither opium nor warfare. Maybe we are called to a deeper spirit of wisdom. Whatever our experience, whether of poverty or of abundance, sadness or joy, we need to understand it in a larger context. We hunger for understanding as much as anything else.

Part of that context is time. In the Kingdom of God, by the heavenly clock, experiences change. Those who are poor will not always be poor. Those who are rich will not always be rich. Popularity, laughter, tears: these are not static, permanent states. And through all these evolutions, our understanding of God and our purpose here will change. Those who mistake the experience of the moment for eternal realities are not in tune with God's dynamic workings in the world.

And part of the context is relationship. How are we in relationship with those on the other side of the blessing/woe divide? Because, yes, we can choose to cross lines there. The poor can share their experience of the kingdom of God with the rich, when the rich share their present consolations. Those who are hungry and those who are full can share the physical and spiritual hunger and feasting that God promises. We can notice who is crying and who is laughing and share tears and joy, balancing the see-saw of life's troubles and celebrations. Those who receive honor

can listen to those who experience shame, and grow into wiser people, and change the whole system of hatred and exclusion and defamation. Make no mistake, those blessed ones have a lot to offer.

Maybe the saints are the ones who respond to this calling imbedded in the blessings and the woes. They refuse to let the categories remain, they work towards mixing it up now, before the distant promise of heaven. They cross the line. They aspire to deeper connections and inspire us to the same. All Saints' Day is about aspiration and inspiration: God is asking us, ordinary people, do extraordinary things. One way to do that is to understand our suffering and our joy in the big picture, our relationship to those “others”, whoever they are.

I spoke about St Francis earlier, with the children. I am sure that he had flaws, and that many of them have been whitewashed by legend over time. But there is no doubt but that his spiritual vision was expansive, including all of creation. He recognized the unique connection that humans have to animals, to air and water, in a way that we and modern environmentalists see as life-giving and life-saving. Perhaps he would be at Standing Rock, South Dakota today, if he were around. During the blood bath of the Crusades, Francis took a trip to visit the Muslim Sultan of Egypt – a peace delegation of sorts. Neither man converted the other, but they discovered a deep respect for the deep spirituality that transcends religion. The story is that Francis came home to Italy particularly impressed with the five daily prayers of Islam as an example of devotion to God.

My father was not a perfect person. He was wonderful and flawed. During my lifetime, he almost never set foot in a church. But on All Saint's Day, and many other days, I remember him. He had experienced poverty, hunger, grief, and rejection. But it did not leave him accepting of those things for others. When he heard that a woman had started a free after school program for poor children, almost all African American, in a small city near our home, he was inspired to cross a line. He would go to work early a couple of days a week so that he could leave early enough to go volunteer at Aunt Bessie's Open Door. He taught the kids woodworking. Just for fun. Just to be kind. Just because they needed someone. Just so they wouldn't have to wait until the system changed enough to rescue them from poverty. He dreamed of a better world...not a Kingdom of Heaven, but a place where needs were met, children were loved, and color didn't matter. That was his calling, though he might not have used such language.

When I do outreach work with the church – a youth work trip, cooking at soup kitchens, any kind of volunteering, really - it is partly because of the influence of my atheist father. And so I offer my work in those settings in his memory. All of you know saints, or were perhaps influenced by a saint that you never met. So if I can suggest one All Saint's Day project for you it would be this: as you find ways to express God's calling in the coming days, offer that expression on behalf of a loved saint who has died, especially someone who had dreams unfulfilled. This is the kind of worship in action that builds us up spiritually and serves all those Jesus blessed. Today, during the prayers of the people, I will invite you to bring those people to mind in prayer.

And so let's remember the saints: not those who seemed pure and perfect, but those who crossed the purity lines and rewrote the standards of perfection. Let's remember saints: not those who thought only of the afterlife, but those who seized life here and now and shared the good things they had received from God. Let's remember them with joy, because they have formed us in our best yearnings and convictions.

Blessed are you, when the poverty of your neighbor touches your heart and makes you reach out. Woe to you if you think your own wealth is sufficient for happiness. Blessed are you, when you notice those without enough food, and it brings forth pangs of hunger in your own belly. Woe to you when your fullness makes you insensitive and complacent. Blessed are you, when your grieving neighbor finds in you a compassionate companion. Woe to you, when your laughter deafens you to the sorrows we all share. Blessed are you, when each hate crime, each unjust exclusion, each cruel taunt make you an advocate for the victim. Woe to you, when honor and recognition and admiration lift you above concern for those victims.

We are entering a week of political choices – for many of us, an active choice that was denied to our foremothers. The long arc of Susan B. Anthony’s work is coming to bear fruit. And so we bless her. I close with the words of John Nelson, Pastor of Church on the Hill, UCC, in Lenox, Massachusetts. He writes:

“Which ideology wins an election will influence our lives: granted. But the work of the faithful remains the same, regardless: to answer meaninglessness with purposeful compassion; to respond to exceptionalism with universal forgiveness; to reply to fearful bigotry by taking on the perspective of those who have suffered persistent indignities; to mend the world.”
Amen.