

Revelation 7: 9-17
I John 3: 1-3
Matthew 5: 1-12

What We Will Be Has Not Yet Been Revealed
November 5, 2017 – All Saint's
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Today we celebrate All Saints. Or, as one dictionary might suggest: All People “acknowledged as holy or virtuous and typically regarded as being in heaven after death.” The word saint means “holy one”. Every soul in heaven is a saint, whether they have the official title bestowed by the Catholic authorities or not. The Catholic Church canonizes souls with the title of Saint (with a capital S) primarily to present their followers with examples of piety and faith. But they, and we, recognize a second category of saints: Christians on earth (and, Catholics would say, in purgatory). In the New Testament, this is primarily how the term is used. Imagine if we stopped referring to “the members of the Norwich Congregational Church, UCC” and instead spoke of ourselves as “the saints of Norwich”. That is, indeed, how our ancestors here would have spoken, even if it makes us squirm a bit.

Sainthood is not entirely serious, not entirely without its own humor. In the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo, puckishly prayed, “Lord, give me chastity ... but not yet.” Pope John XXIII, who served as pope from 1958 to 1963 made a famous joke came when a journalist innocently asked him, “Your Holiness, how many people work in the Vatican?” John paused, thought it over, and said, “About half of them.”

Some people like to wax poetic about sainthood, as in when they look at a certain type of stained glass window and say, “Saints are the ones that the light shines through.” But in our sanctuary of beautiful clear glass, we are not even given this image. Others try to explain the mind of a saint. The late William Stringfellow described saints as “those men and women who relish the event of life as a gift and who realize that the only way to honor such a gift is to give it away.”

Our custom has been to use this Sunday to remember those we love who have died. We take a moment to grieve those we have lost but also to move on to thanksgiving for their lives and, even more, for their place now among the saints gathered in the nearer presence of God. And this can bring us a sense of reverence and joy; a recognition of the deep trust and hope that transcends all our little expressions of trust and hope.

But today, I wonder whether we can broaden our vision of what today's readings and today's prayers might reveal. It starts from recognizing that death is one kind of loss that surfaces today. Loss shows up in many places, though: in moving house, or in leave-taking, or in changing jobs. It comes from having children grow up. It comes as people age and diminish, in loss of employment (redundancy, as the British so baldly put it). It comes when we are exhausted from the care of a special needs child, and the awareness of things that need to be given up to offer that care. Loss shows up as disappointment, dreams deferred and hopes dashed. Do our Scriptures have anything to tell us about loss, not only of loved ones, but of these precious things that make us what we are and what we will be?

Today, we heard words of promise to juxtapose against any kind of loss or challenge. Some promises are lightly made, and not worth much. Others have the weight of reality to them: they seem to create a reality of their own. When I promised my children, each year, long ago, that their Halloween costumes would be ready on time, that set in motion weeks of sewing. And, believe me, those costumes became real. As people of faith, we take Scriptural promises as a Word beyond us that sets things in motion. We need them because when we are stuck in grief or loss, we may not have the ability to imagine, let alone activate, a hopeful future. We take hold of words of promise so that we may become a new creation, something that has yet to be revealed.

The Beatitudes are embedded in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. They are familiar to many of us, and it takes a little work for us to imagine how shocking these teachings were 2000 years ago, and to how realize how shocking they are today. Jesus gives a blessing to all kinds of people, but he singles out the kinds of people that do not normally get blessings, like the poor in spirit, the mourners, the hungry and the thirsty...and the persecuted. He almost seems to be saying that the world praises dead saints and persecutes living ones. Even so, Jesus calls these suffering people blessed, or happy even. This is a paradox and a promise that can only exist in the Kingdom of God: the one that we pray each Sunday to come on earth as it is in heaven.

But our world, our day-to-day world, does not like paradox, so it gives these categories of people little attention, just as our silent losses and griefs may not be noticed. And yet, Jesus says, "blessed are..." Not, "someday you will be blessed, by and by," but blessed **are**" present tense. Or even, as some translate it, "Happy are..." Jesus is telling us, and promising us, somehow, blessing as a creative reality. Don't just think about some heavenly future: this promise has more weight and power than that. In the same way, so many people read passages from the Book of Revelation as some description of paradise, some far future, otherworldly vision. But I am not sure that this is how it was written. What if all that multitude, from all "tribes and peoples and languages" the great persecuted and blessed crowd, was actually praising God today? What if the promise is so powerful that we can embody that kind of worship, and what if, in doing so, we ensure that "they will hunger no more, and thirst no more," and that tears are wiped from sorrowing eyes? After all, in heaven as it is normally pictured, why would anyone be crying anyway? It is today that we need, and we need to offer food and drink and solace.

The gift of blessing is not a flu shot. Blessing does not immunize you from pain or loss or death. Blessing does not guarantee an easy life. It is a gift that transcends ordinary happiness. It makes us all hopeful children of God, as the letter of John says, ready for transformation. What we will be has not yet been revealed. In love and trust and hope we respond to the promises of God, ready to be made into saints. Ready to join the saints who have passed and the saints among us in the work of the Kingdom.

Meanwhile, we live in the border country between memory and hope, between assurance and fulfillment. And so we take hold of promise that God sees our sadness and knows its source; that God knows the dark moods that oppress us, the uphill struggles we face. Just as God accompanied our departed loved ones in their journey, God accompanies us. God sees us, adopts us, blesses us, and will reveal blessing through us.

As we struggle to hold on to these promises, we can remember that struggling is not a crime. As Martin Luther was reforming the church, he taught about something called the "marks of the

church” – Preaching the Word, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, etc.. He added a seventh “mark” – struggle. The assumption is that when there is faith there is also struggle. And so when we feel hopeless, and wonder if we have lost our faith, God names us among the most faithful. Blessed are those who struggle. Blessed are those who relish the event of life as a gift. Blessed are those who honor the a gift by giving it away. Blessed are those who know that they are God’s children now, and that what they will be has not been revealed. Blessed are those who are the hands of God, wiping every tear from sorrowing eyes. We are busy with the work of the saints.

In the words of Laura Everett,
the executive director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches,
“You do not have to end your weeping,
but know that God desires to wipe away every tear.
You do not have to have the strength to say the names of your dead today,
but know that the Lord knows and cares for all souls.
You do not have to have the taste of heaven on your lips today,
but you are invited to eat the bread of heaven.”
Amen.