

All Saints' Sunday

November 1, 2020

Emmanuel Episcopal Church

Matthew 5:1-12; Rev. 7:9-17

People will sometimes ask pastors a few years after they have graduated from seminary: What has surprised you about being a pastor? What did you not expect when you said yes to this call to the ministry? I can tell you that when I was 26 years old, graduated from seminary and taking my first church assignment, I did not expect to perform as many funerals as I did over 9 years of pastoral ministry. I have officiated more funerals than weddings. I also didn't expect funerals to be a blessing. I know this is strange to say. It is a great privilege to sit with and walk with people in some of the most vulnerable and bare moments of their lives.

I think this is why All Saints' Day is one of my favorite holy days of the year. On this day, we specifically remember the saints who have gone before us. We read names, we tell stories, we remember these persons of faith, the lessons they taught us, the examples they set, and the ways that we are who we are because of them. We are always connected to the saints, to those who have gone on before us, but on All Saints' Day, we focus in a bit on this connection. We shine a light onto these lives and ask, how are we called to live as followers of Jesus in light of the lives of those who have gone before us? What does this call us to do?

When we talk about the saints, we are not insinuating that these were perfect people. We aren't glossing over mistakes or erasing the real struggles or stories. The word saint comes from the Latin "sanctus" which means holy. In the Bible, holiness is about being set apart for God's purposes. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are holy because they are set apart for God. They are called to live in a way that is different than the world around them – a way that points to God.

In the New Testament, Paul refers to the people of the church as "the saints." The saints of Ephesus, the saints in Rome, and even, God bless them, those crazy, conflictive saints in Corinth. The word "saint" in the New Testament is a synonym for the word Christian or believer. All of those who worship God are called to be saints, those who are holy, who are set apart for God's purposes in the world.

I encourage you to spend some time today remembering the saints who have played a significant role in your life. Who are the persons who showed you, in real life, what it looks like to follow Jesus? To live for God's kingdom purposes? These can be family, friends, or even people you have never met.

For example, when I was reflecting on saints who have gone before us this year, in 2020, the first person who came to mind was John Lewis. John Lewis was known for his relentless pursuit of justice. Lewis gave himself, body and heart, to the struggle for justice. As a young black man, he sat at lunch counters and was struck, spit on, and burned with cigarettes. He was a freedom rider and was beaten almost to the point of death. He marched with Dr. King at Selma, and was beaten badly on camera, having his skull fractured. That visual of brutality at Selma was the spark that made the 1965 Voting Rights Act a reality. I was particularly moved reflecting on this in the past week, considering that we are just two days away from a major election. Just 55 years ago, the Voting Rights Act made major strides to give Black people the right to vote, striking down the literacy tests that Black people had been required to take before they registered to vote and replacing segregationist voting registrars with federal registrars to ensure that Black people were no longer denied the ballot. Lewis was elected to congress in 1986, and his colleagues called him the “Conscience of the Congress.” He made noise about healthcare, fighting poverty, voting rights, and at 76 years old, after the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Florida, Lewis led a sit-in on the floor of the House of Representatives to bring attention to gun violence.

In 2018 Lewis posted on twitter, “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” Good trouble, was Lewis’ catchphrase.

Just a few days before he died, Lewis wrote an essay to be published upon his death. It is moving and I encourage you to read it in its entirety. This part in particular struck me, as I read it next to our passage from Revelation, “Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it. You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in their soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the most excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind,

brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

When I read this, I kept seeing that image from Revelation, of the multitude gathered, from every nation and every tribe, gathered around the throne of God, singing and worshipping. This multitude has not had an easy life. They have come through the fire, through the “ordeal” the text says. Their robes have been washed in blood. That reminds me of Lewis, beaten, bloodied, and put in jail numerous times through his life.

The socio historic context of Revelation is one of empire and domination. This letter is written to an oppressed people, who are experiencing suffering and physical persecution as they claim allegiance to God over Caesar/Nero/empire. The persons in this multitude have come through the struggle, they have overcome and they are experiencing God’s Kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, the beloved community. They didn’t go up, God has come down and set things right. Healed. Restored. Hope that seemed elusive is now reality.

Revelation is not a text written to keep the masses under control, content with the way things are, frightened of rebellion or the pursuit of change. This is a text written to encourage the saints, to strengthen the good troublemakers, to give them the dose of courage and the assurance that they need to press on, to keep going, to fight the fight. To continue getting into their good trouble, working for justice, refusing to give into selfishness, greed, and the values of empire. To continue living and dying for the Kingdom of God and God’s righteousness.

The other fighter for justice who we recently lost is Ruth Bader Ginsberg. The first Jewish woman appointed to the Supreme Court. Shortly after her death, I came across a powerful piece of writing by Molly Conway. Conway gives some context into the Jewish perspective on justice and righteousness, and legacy. “When we say that Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a tzaddeket, (righteous person) we don’t just mean she was a nice person. What we’re saying is that she was a thoughtful person who worked tirelessly to create a more just world. One that would perpetuate equality and access, one that wasn’t reliant on charity, one that was better for people she did not know, without the expectation of praise or fame. THAT is what it means to be a Tzaddeket, and I can’t think of anyone who better embodies the pursuit of justice. When we say, “May her memory be for blessing” the blessing we speak of is not “may we remember her fondly” or “may her memory be a blessing to us” the blessing implied is this: May you be like Ruth. Jewish thought teaches us that when a person dies, it is up to those who bear her memory to keep her goodness

alive. We do this by remembering her, we do this by speaking her name, we do this by carrying on her legacy. We do this by continuing to pursue justice, righteousness, sustainability. So when you hear, “May her memory be for blessing” don’t hear “It’s nice to remember her.” Hear, “It’s up to us to carry on her legacy.” May her memory be for blessing. May her memory be for revolution. May we become a credit to her name.”

This has lodged itself in my heart and brain, as I have been reflecting on what it means to remember the saints. To continue their work for righteousness and peace, justice and freedom, kindness and mercy, equality and love. To carry on their legacy. Sometimes these folks are “churchy” and sometimes they are not. The church does not have a monopoly on joy, love, kindness, justice, hope, compassion, hospitality, welcome, generosity, peacemaking. Don’t get me wrong, these do sound suspiciously like the Fruit of the Spirit from Galatians; the marks of a life lived in the Spirit of God. Or, we could look at the Beatitudes from the text today in Matthew, which Tom Long calls, “the traits of the citizenry of the Kingdom of God.” They are characteristics of a holy life, a life set apart for God’s work/purposes in the world.

When we light candles today, there is a long list of saints who I will remember: BG Fitzgerald, Henry Moody, Rodney Brown, Paul Falls, Billy Hughes, John Lane, Bill Forbes, Kristin Dickerson, Granny Lackey, GiGi, Milly Bles, Robbin Carroll, Leontine Kelly, Jeter. I thank God for their lives, for the ways that I am who I am because of their life/influence. None of them were perfect people. Each of them blessed me and blessed the world. As I give thanks for them, I also ask God to give me the strength and the courage to live fully and embody these characteristics, that my life also will build for God’s kingdom in the world, that my real life, in the struggles and the victories, in the stories and the misses, in the ordinary everyday living may move forward God’s kingdom work of love, justice, and mercy in this world that God so loves.

May her memory be for blessing. May we become a credit to her name.