

#50 10-11

## *Balancing Blessings*

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the Word of our Lord . . .

Well, according to our Bulletin inserts – today we are celebrating All Saint's Day. According to one online source called, "Homilies By Email," "all Saints Day is the Church's Memorial Day, a time to remember those who have died in the faith of Christ. It is traditionally celebrated on November 1, but may be observed on the first Sunday in November instead. For Protestants, for whom the observance of special days for saints may be problematic, we understand that in the strict sense of the word this is a festival day in honor of the grace of Christ. In the classical tradition the calendar was divided into two patterns, the dominical cycle and the sanctoral cycle. The dominical cycle included all Sundays and other days of the year which celebrated and recalled the major events in the life of our Lord (hence "dominical"). The sanctoral cycle emerged as the Church sought to remember the witness of particular saints, especially martyrs, on the day of their death (their heavenly birthday). Gradually, however, the popularity of saints days tended to crowd out the days of the dominical cycle as the number of saints to be remembered grew. By the time of the Reformation only the most major of the days in the dominical cycle were not displaced by one of the saints, and so the reaction was to get rid of saints days altogether."

Being brought up in mainline protestant churches, I've never been much of one to think about Saints. There was always some distant fascination with the concept, but I was not taught about Saints and which one was particularly for what cause. I would observe Saints in Cathedrals, pictures, stories, hanging around certain people's necks on a chain, and feel a certain distant wonder, and yet, there was another part of me that felt like they reverence for Saints was just a distraction from the time and energy needed to focus on God; like Saints were lesser Gods – and therefore in the realm of idols . . .

Part of my childhood church experience was in the Presbyterian Church, and many years in the Lutheran/Reformed church Germany – and they both had as part of their worship, creeds. In the creeds were mentioned, "the communion of saints" – so a part of me realized that Saints weren't a part of the faith tradition just as idol worship.

I remember when I was in seminary; I had given up dancing, smoking and heavy drinking and even the potential to ever be married. I had read that Paul said we were to remain in the state we were in when we were called, married or single, and stay that way – so I assumed I was to remain single the rest of my life. And a friend of mine smirked a response - something to the effect of me trying to become a saint -and I immediately back peddled . . . " . . . me? A saint? What a laugh!" And yet . . . I knew deep down inside, that was my goal. Everyone I talked to thought it was ridiculous to want to be a saint, so forgetaboutit!

And then, recently, in preparation for this sermon, I read this story about Thomas Merton from his book *The Seven Story Mountain*:

I forget what we were arguing about, but in the end Lax suddenly turned around and asked me the question: "What do you want to be, anyway?"

I could not say, "I want to be Thomas Merton the well-known writer of all those book reviews in the back pages of the Times Book Review," or "Thomas Merton the assistant instructor of Freshman English at the New Life Social Institute for Progress and Culture," so I put the thing on the spiritual plane, where I knew it belonged and said:

"I don't know; I guess what I want is to be a good Catholic."

"What do you mean, you want to be a good Catholic?"

The explanation I gave was lame enough, and expressed my confusion, and betrayed how little I had really thought about it at all.

Lax did not accept it.

"What you should say" – he told me – "what you should say is that you want to be a saint."

A saint! The thought struck me as a little weird. I said:

"How do you expect me to become a saint?"

"By wanting to," said Lax simply.

"I can't be a saint," I said, "I can't be a saint." And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities: the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they must do, cannot reach the level that they must reach: the cowardice that says: "I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin," but which means, by those words: "I do not want to give up my sins and my attachments."

I recall that when the potential for me to become a saint was laughed at, there was a deep sense of embarrassment and shame. Embarrassment that someone would think me incapable, and shame that I would even venture to think that I could. And yet, it seemed so natural – like a normal progression. Honestly, who feels a strong, close, grateful, loving relationship with God and isn't inclined to want to strive to be as worthy as one can be?

Think about it for a moment, though, in the context of the Beatitudes. It seems that Jesus is stretching out the possibility for all to hope for sainthood. Those who struggle from so many ailments that the world views as being bad – Jesus gives hope that in spite of these challenges we can become blessed – we can experience the nearness of God, we can strive to know sainthood.

For, what does it mean to be a saint or to even want to be a saint? It is a longing for the soul to be one with the holy. It is a dedication to God that is all encompassing. And yet, all humans must live in the life form that we were born into. That is why God had to come to earth in the form of a human, to show us that it can be done – and perhaps even in that being and all its weaknesses – that being is Godly.

Ann and Barry Ulanov wrote in, *The Healing Imagination: The Meeting of Psyche and Soul*:

Our soul is that objectively existing opening in our subjective life that knows about God and goodness and evil, about the transcendent and its reach into the ordinary, into our daily life, into everything. The soul registers with special pleasure our experience of mystery and its source, and wants above all else to know better that source, that ultimate other in our lives. Soul is willingness, even desire, to correspond to that other as it makes itself known to us. The soul's imaginings dwell on who this other is, who this God is that comes to us. Soul asks, Who is there? What do you want of me? How can I be for you, be toward you?

Recall for a moment the Epistle from today's readings, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure."

I believe in Saints now. I believe there are Saints that no church would ever recognize and set a day after. I believe that all those people that Paul was writing to he recognized as being saints in the context of being God's children. All those who struggle with their humanity and have hope in their faith in God – are saints. All those he spoke to in the Beatitudes are Saints.

According to Leonard Cohen in, *Beautiful Losers* (1966):

A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love.

"It is a kind of balance that is his glory . . . It is good to have among us such men, [and women I might add] such balancing monsters of love." The sermon text for today is just that – balancing out the full meaning of being human- for those who know the pain of life, are aware of the closeness of God – those who only want to know the pleasures of life, will find only themselves and their weaknesses in the end. Those Saints who strive to balance their whole lives with the love of God find eternal blessings.

"And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts in Jesus Christ. Amen"