

All Saints' Sunday, November 1, 2020
The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-15
The Rev. Devon Anderson

This past Friday the immediate family of our fellow parishioner, Bill Swarts, gathered in the chapel to celebrate Bill's life and lay his remains in our columbarium. It was a lovely service – full of laughing and love, full of cello music and stories, tears and remembrances. We prayed the burial office from the Prayer Book – in Rite I language with the “thee”s and “thous”s – just the way Bill liked it. I must admit I had to rehearse beforehand – the language doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. But the old language, the old rite, is part of our collective tradition, out of which come the words we use today to pray and worship. The old language with its focus on our manifold sins and redemption, is a connector, a bridge to who we are and from where we have come. Our Christian practice, if we're doing it right, is always evolving, always deepening in consciousness and awareness, always, if we're doing it right, changing and growing. Our Christian practice is a process, connected both to what came before, and to where we're heading.

At the end of Bill's service, the family and I processed to the columbarium. That's the place right outside our main sanctuary with the name plates of the people who have died, whose cremains rest in niches behind the name plates. One of my very, very favorite things about Trinity is the columbarium. I love that it's not stuck in a basement or underground crypt somewhere, as columbaria are in so many other churches. I love that on Sunday mornings when we gather for 10:15 worship, that the lights are on over the columbarium and the sanctuary doors are wide open, that we can see the columbarium as we worship. It feels like all the souls buried in that place are being invited to join us in worship, encircling us and cheering us on, creating a web of connection and belonging that keeps us tethered to each other between the earthly life and the eternal life. I love that on feast days like All Saints and Christmas and Easter, Elizabeth Sherman hangs a small, lovely decoration or flower on each and every niche – dressing them up for the holidays, including them in our celebrations and observances, affirming their eternal connection to us, their place as brothers and sisters in Christ.

What was especially wonderful about Friday is that Bill Swarts chaired the building project that made the columbarium possible. He conceptualized it, fundraised for it, oversaw its construction. He was, in so many ways, a provider – one of his most finely tuned virtues. And he provided for our church, and ultimately for himself and his own family, a physical reminder of the place of the departed in our on-going, growing, changing, ever-deepening spiritual lives and relationship with Christ.

After the funeral I studied the list I asked our administrator, Sarah, to send me of the names of every person who has died at Trinity in the 10 years I've served as rector. There are 33 souls on the list, 25 for which I officiated their burial. 33 saints who have gone on to claim their glory, who walked through the gates of heaven as they were flung wide to receive them. Except for Harrison Young, who died tragically and shockingly the day before he was born, everyone else on the list was old. Everyone else ended their earthly pilgrimage after decades upon decades of life. I spent a bit of time reading each name, remembering things about them, circumstances and stories, conversations and experiences. I remembered, for example, Patty Williams and her husband Bob, whose membership at Trinity Church spanned 8 decades. It was at Trinity that they raised their children, and their children raised their children. It was at Trinity that the two sang in the choir, Patty worked as office administrator, and Bob populated, over time, every single parish committee and initiative. A few years before she died in 2015,

Patty invited me to her home on Bell Street. It was sometime after Bob had been hospitalized for pneumonia and they had moved their bed down to the first floor so Bob didn't have to climb the stairs any longer. Their bed sat at the far end of the living room in front of wall-to-wall shelves, jammed with books, framed photos and the odd hymnal. On many visits, Patty would reference something she had read that week, a quote from a memoir or a newspaper clip – and on some occasions, she spent most of our visit searching for it. This particular visit was during Advent, the church season that leads up to Christmas, and Patty wanted to talk about *A Christmas Memory* by Truman Capote. “The short story is autobiographical,” Patty told me, “made up of little vignettes from Capote’s life as a young boy when he was sent to live with distant cousins in rural Alabama.” His primary caregiver was his elderly cousin Miss Sook – a simple woman full of creativity and wonder, who he refers to throughout the story as “my friend.”

“There’s a really great line in here I’ve been thinking about,” Patty said. And she pulled the book down from the shelf and began thumbing through it. “Here it is,” she said, and she began to read to me the part where Truman and Miss Sook take a beat-up wicker baby carriage into the woods to cut themselves a Christmas tree. “Lugging it like a kill,” Patty read, “we commence the long trek out. Every few yards we abandon the struggle, sit down and pant. But we have the strength of triumphant huntsmen; that and the tree’s virile, icy perfume revive us, goad us on. Many compliments accompany our sunset return along the red clay road to town...Once a car stops and the rich mill owner’s lazy wife leans out and whines, ‘Give ya two-bits cash for that ole tree,’...but my friend promptly shakes her head: ‘We wouldn’t take a dollar.’ The mill owner’s wife persists. ‘A dollar my foot! Fifty cents. That’s my last offer. Goodness, woman, you can get another one.’ In answer my friend gently reflects: ‘I doubt it. *There’s never two of anything.*’”

Patty stopped reading and sat back in her chair. “I love that,” she told me, “*There’s never two of anything.*” And she showed me where she had first underlined the sentence almost 50 years ago.

A few days after Patty died, my doorbell rang, and when I answered the door, there on my porch stood one of Patty’s three sons. In his hands was the Truman Capote book. “I think this belongs to you,” he said. “Really? Are you sure?” I asked, “Doesn’t someone in the family want it?” “It’s yours,” he said. “She’d want you to have it. I know it meant a lot to you both.”

Today is All Saints’ Sunday – a high holy day in the church that celebrates the communion of saints – all saints – past, present, and yet to come. All saints – ordinary and extraordinary, famous and unknown. All saints – you and me. And we mark the reality of the saints: *there’s never two of anything*. Each saint is unique, one of a kind. On this day we proclaim that the dead, and those we see no more in this life, are still part of us, and they are even a continuous, consistent, animating presence in the church. St. Paul describes the saints as “a great cloud of witnesses,” so when they have passed, we hold them up, hoping, perhaps, that their virtue – their ability to have faith in God in the face of an oppressive empire or a failing crop or the blight of cancer – their virtue, might become our own virtue, our own strength.

But here’s the thing: we do ourselves a disservice on this holy day by romanticizing the saints – our loved ones, and the famous ones. Because what we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or their perfection or their superpowers – so far beyond our reach. *What we celebrate is our belief in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings*. It has been my experience that *what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly, but rather God’s*

ability to work through us. “The title ‘saint,’” as one theologian put it, “is always conferred, never earned.” Or as the good St. Paul puts it, “For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13). I have come to realize that all the saints I’ve known, and all the saints I’ve read about and studied, have been accidental ones – people who inadvertently stumbled into redemption like they were looking for something else at the time, like people who have a drinking problem and manage to get sober and help others to do the same, or people who are as kind as they are hostile. Because let’s face it – Mother Theresa was known for her rudeness to visitors, and Dorothy Day had a wild youth, and Nelson Mandela didn’t take care of his family, and Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy cheated on their wives. These are not super heroes – they are people with flaws and bad judgment and insecurities as the rest of us. But God worked through them, used their minds and their hands and their wills to do incredible things for the world.

The Good News of All Saints’ is Good News for us, because it’s about worshipping the God who works through human beings for the common good, for kindness, for justice, for renewal. Implicit in this day is the promise that like the saints before us, we can be saints, too, simply by allowing God to work through us, by continuing to avail ourselves as people on whom God is at work. I really do believe that. And availing ourselves for God to work through us is born in a religious life, a life bound by ritual and community, by repetition, by work, by giving and receiving, by proclaiming grace.

On most All Saints’ Sundays the Gospel we read is the Beatitudes, Jesus’ “blessed are the” speech to the people standing on the mountain beside the Sea of Galilee. But the Beatitudes can make people who are called saints seem so unattainably good and the people who aren’t (that would be us) feel unworthy. But – what if the Beatitudes aren’t about a list of conditions we should try to meet to be blessed? What if they are not virtues we should aspire to? What if Jesus’ “blessed are the meek” is not instructive, but performative – that the pronouncement of blessing is actually what confers the blessing itself? What if the Sermon on the Mount is all about Jesus’ lavish blessing of the people around him on that hillside on that day, blessing all the accidental saints in this world, especially those who that world – like ours – didn’t seem to have much time for: people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.

Maybe Jesus was simply blessing the ones around him that day who didn’t otherwise receive blessing, who had come to believe that, for them, blessings would never be in the cards. I mean – come on – doesn’t that just sound like something Jesus would do?

So what if Jesus were here at Trinity right now, offering some new beatitudes to all the saints who came to church today? I wonder if he’d have a new list of beatitudes. Maybe something like this:

Blessed are the agnostics.

Blessed are they who doubt. Those who aren’t sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they no longer take in new information.

Blessed are those who feel they have nothing to offer.

Blessed are the little ones who run to the sacristy to eat communion bread after church.

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstraction.

Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, for whom tears could fill an ocean. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like.

Blessed are the parents of dead children.

Blessed are they who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted anymore.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are the motherless, the alone, the ones from whom so much have been taken. Blessed are those who 'still aren't over it yet.'

Blessed are those who mourn.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the losers and the babies and the parts of ourselves that are so small, the parts of ourselves that don't want to make eye contact with a world that loves only the winners.

Blessed are the forgotten.

Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the underrepresented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide their anxiety or the wounds to their spirit. Blessed are the meek.

You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the wrongly accused, the ones who never catch a break, the ones for whom life is hard, for Jesus chose to surround himself with people like them.

Blessed are those without documentation.

Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are foster kids and trophy kids and special ed kids and every other kid who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Blessed are they who know there has to be more than this. Because they are right.

Blessed are those who make terrible business decisions for the sake of people.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers and the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are the kindhearted NFL players and the fundraising trophy wives.

Blessed are the kids who step between the bullies and the weak.

Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

You see, we're here today not to worship saints but to worship God – as that creative, surprising, powerful, gentle presence the works through us and those who have come before – to restore, and reconcile, and renew the world. Nothing more. Nothing less. We come as we are – broken, unsure, timid, feeling unworthy – and God works on us, little by little, for our whole lives, and finds ways for light and love to shine through us to others. God's patience and tenacity endures. God never gives up. And so, today, we take our places in the "great cloud of witnesses." Alleluia. AMEN.

Sources:

"Blessed Are They," and "Saint Cookies," in *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, by Nadia Bolz-Weber, pp. 3-11, pp.181-189.