

**All Saints Sunday Nov. 5, 2017**

## **Light Shines Through Mourning**

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It is said that wisdom comes when we least expect it. Such was the case one All Saints Sunday morning, when a priest was giving a children's sermon. The priest, seated on the steps in front of the altar, with the children of the parish gathered around him, asked the children, "what is a saint?". One little girl, perhaps inspired by the stained-glass windows in that church building, said, "Saints are people the light shines through."

Now it is quite possible the little girl was speaking literally, that perhaps she and the rest of the congregation were surrounded by windows of the rich, deep colors of stained-glass depicting people from the Bible like Mary, or the Apostles, or people from the history of the church who we remember for their remarkable sacrifices or contributions; people like Francis of Assisi, Hildegard, Patrick, Samuel Seabury, the first Bishop in the Episcopal Church, or Philander Chase the first Bishop of Ohio who started both Kenyon College and Bexley Hall Seminary. Surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, the little girl might have seen the morning sunlight stream through the windows, bringing the stained-glass depictions to life, and simply stated what she saw.

But it isn't always what is said that is as important as what is heard; and there is certainly more than one way to hear the little girl's answer describing a saint. One of the things about stained-glass is that it doesn't only work one way. While the sunlight does stream in through the deep rich colors so that those inside the church building can be impressed by the beauty of the windows, when the sun has set, and darkness falls, the lights inside can illuminate those same windows so that everyone outside the building can see their beautiful details.

Here at Church of the Good Shepherd, our church building is decidedly lacking in stained glass windows. Instead our windows are clear glass; we are not surrounded by the saints of the past and reminded of their sacrifices, examples, and contributions. Instead we are always reminded of our neighbors, of our place in the heart of Ohio University, and perhaps these clear windows remind us of Bishop Hobson's vision for campus ministry in the Diocese of Southern Ohio, and our mission to be present, to be a light to our neighbors: the students, faculty, retired faculty, and staff of OU.

If you ever wonder, as I often do, how we are doing living into that mission, those of us who were up bright and early the first two days of classes at OU this year saw firsthand the reactions to our presence as we gave away free coffee and donuts. Those who passed us by, whether they stopped to receive coffee and donuts or not, seemed to recognize us. One student even said she knew us, as she said in her own words, we are the “church that is always out here doing stuff” then proceeded to name our ministries to us. So, Church of the Good Shepherd, we are doing the work of the saints, we are letting the light of God shine through us, so that God’s kingdom becomes a little closer to being known in the world, starting with the world outside our church doors.

That of course, is another way to interpret the little girl’s answer to the question of what is a saint. A saint is someone who lets the Light of God shine through them, not just those saints whose names we remember and celebrate, but the person or persons who made less recognized contributions or sacrifices: someone who took the time to listen, or to walk alongside us when we were hurting or suffering, someone who taught the Sunday school class that opened our eyes to seeing God’s Presence in the scriptures, the priest who challenged us to grow deeper into a calling, those who showed us what a life of joy is like. All Saints Day can remind us saints aren’t just the people depicted in stained glass, they are simply the people who love God and their neighbors.

We can see this idea reflected in our readings for today, readings that start with the powerful, symbolic image of what living in close proximity to God might look like in the reading from Revelation, to the loving message that we are all God’s children from the first letter from John, to the strange and challenging opening words of Jesus’ sermon on the mount from Matthew’s Gospel, also called the Beatitudes. Many a sermon and many a commentator has said that the reason we hear the Beatitudes on All Saints Sunday is they are a call for how we are to live, our new code of behavior issued by Jesus. And there is a time and place for such sermons and commentaries. But perhaps the words of Jesus about who God favors isn’t necessarily issuing a code of behavior as it a challenge to commonly held ideas about who is blessed or loved by God.

We Christians can forget that saints, even the ones preserved in stained glass, were people like you and me. They had temptations, struggles, tempers, short comings, character flaws. They made mistakes. Most were not popular or liked. Many suffered, and their lives were not marked by comforts like wealth, security, or happy family lives. Loving God and loving our neighbors does not

guarantee our neighbors will love us back, and, contrary to popular thought, God's love doesn't necessarily look like big bank accounts, packed pews on Sunday mornings, overstuffed refrigerators, vast amounts of property, or prominent places on boards or committees. Yet, such signs of wealth or prestige are often interpreted as signs of blessing by God.

This idea can be seen in the Old Testament, that those who found favor with God found themselves blessed with big families, land, livestock, whatever they wanted. However, interpreters of those stories often miss the struggles and losses those who were said to be blessed by God also suffered through. In Jesus day, as in our own time, riches were seen as signs that God loved you better than the person who had less.

Jesus' opening words of his sermon on the mount bluntly and blatantly contradicted that assumption. Jesus named the people God blesses or loves, as the folks who have the least likes on their Facebook posts: the humble as opposed those who brag, the ones who dare to grieve their losses instead of ignoring or burying them. And while I could go on, perhaps this year on All Saints Sunday, this is a good place for us to pause, and consider this particular Beatitude because today we do remember those who have died. And it might do us some good to also remember God blesses those who mourn. This year at Church of the Good Shepherd, we have lost several members and are still mourning their deaths. In the funeral services for these parishioners, we heard those beautiful words of assurance that death is only a change, not an end, that their souls continue in some way we cannot yet see or understand, and God's love for us and them, and our love for them as well as their love for us, maintains that connection through that deep mystery that is resurrection. Which means today as we remember those who have died we do not do so without hope, we remember them because that love still connects us to each other and God, they are now part of that company of heaven we speak about in the Eucharistic Prayer we will pray in a few moments.

While we are reminded God loves those of us who mourn the loss of the saints, the people we saw God's love shine through into our lives, and that love still binds us together, perhaps there is more to this one line in Jesus' sermon. Perhaps those who mourn can also include the people who mourn their sins. Especially when they see the pain their sin has caused. Perhaps those who mourn could include those who lament the sins of the world, those who see how the world has fallen short of God's dream.

This kind of mourning is not hopeless. Indeed, it is perhaps part of how the light of God shines through to the world when people lament the present conditions and recognize we do not need to resign ourselves that such conditions are final, or there is nothing that can be done. We can see God is not yet finished, and there are places where God's light can shine. Perhaps those who have gone before us can inspire us to see mourning as Kingdom work, as a way acknowledge our pain or the pain of someone else for what it is, then move through grief and as we heal, recognize when another person is hurting and reach out, and embody the comfort Jesus spoke about and the author of Revelation so beautifully illustrated when he wrote God will wipe away every tear from the faces of those who cry. While many folks think Revelation is a doomsday account of God's judgment against humans, in our reading today we see there is this heavenly vision of God's dream of heaven and earth so deeply connected that the relationship between humans and God has become so intimate that God is the one who will tenderly dry our tears. This is the very definition of comfort, to come alongside. Comfort is not a trite saying, it is a sacrifice, a giving of oneself. Yet providing comfort does not mean allowing someone to wallow in despair, or constantly lick the wounds of a hurt; providing comfort means to walk with the hurting along the path of healing, so that the sufferer can learn to reach out to and help others.

Today I hear from many people who are grieving the loss of a way of life, both secular ways of life and ways of church life. It is tempting to lick the aching wounds of loss by yearning for the way things used to be. But such a path is cheap comfort at best; it fails to acknowledge God blesses those who mourn with God's Presence, and fails to recognize any loss as change to move through to the other side. Here is where light can shine, and as saints, as people of resurrection, we who mourn can show God's Presence by acknowledging the situation, by coming alongside those who hurt, to listen with open hearts, and share with them the hopeful message of God's blessing on those who mourn, to see the value in grief as a path to healing, so they can show others the same path of hope and resurrection. This is not glamorous work, and I doubt any depiction in stained-glass will result from it, but it is the wise and life-giving work of the saints; those who have gone before us, and those who are currently beside us, behind us or in front of us here today, together with whom we shine the light of God's love to a mourning world, so others will know God's love and God's blessing.