

November 5, 2017
All Saints' (Gospel) and Proper 25 (Lessons), Year A, RCL
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Joshua 3:7-17
Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37
1 Thessalonians 2:9-13
Matthew 5:1-12

There is a lot going on at St. Thomas's today. Just before this service began, Sally Edwards and Jakki Flanagan wrapped up the first part of a three-part Sunday Forum series called "Christian Hope and the End of Life." The reason for the series is simple: the subject of death is hugely important—and commonly avoided. Americans in general are bad at death: bad at addressing it, preparing for it, grieving it, doing it.

Today's installment referenced the best-selling book *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande. Gawande is a surgeon; in *Being Mortal*, he considers how doctors often fail patients at the end of life, by avoiding honest conversations about what's coming. His interest is in helping patients have *better* deaths.

Being Mortal, the book, was the basis of an excellent PBS *Frontline* documentary of the same name. At the end of the documentary, Gawande tells the story of spreading his father's ashes on the Ganges River, and how that act connects his family to the millions of others whose ashes have been and will be spread there. At the end, he says this: "How is dying ever at all acceptable? How is it ever anything except this awful, terrible thing? The only way it is, is that we as humans live for something bigger than ourselves."¹

Today is an appropriate day to think about how to live for something bigger than ourselves—it's All Saint's Sunday. Today we celebrate the entire Communion of Saints—the dead, the living, and the yet-to-come. We celebrate saints famous and unknown. We celebrate the saints right here in this church—which is to say, we celebrate each and every one of us. It's true; if you wonder what it takes to make a saint, look around. Think of the people around you. Think of those we remember today with mementos, candles, and prayers.

Let me offer a brief catechetical sidebar. If you're interested in more public saintly examples, here's a resource you might not know about, *A Great Cloud of Witnesses*. It's an Episcopal Church publication that offers readings, prayers, and short biographies for the commemoration of a breadth of Christian figures throughout history. This book builds on another Episcopal Church resource called *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*. *A Great Cloud of Witnesses* was developed in part to include more women and indigenous people. Though it misses the mark in some ways—some clergy don't like it—it nonetheless expands our conceptions of what it means to be "holy"—that is, what it means to be a "saint."

Let's turn to the Beatitudes, from which we might gather a particular type of instruction about saintly living. In the gospel reading for today, we heard the Beatitudes from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are" *et cetera, et cetera*.

I find it useful here to take a closer look at the word *blessing*. These days, a common use of the word *blessing* is in a sentence that goes something like this: “God has blessed me with good health.” This raises important questions: What about those who *don’t* have good health? Has God purposely *not* blessed them? Has God possibly even *cursed* them? Have they done something to deserve it? Might we be justified in blaming them?

It takes only a few direct conversations with sick people to learn that a person’s greatest fear is often this: that God has something like Santa’s sorting list of naughty and nice, and the tally puts them on the naughty side. They’re sick because they did something wrong. If they’re this sick already, what will happen when they die?

To address this, it may be helpful to return to the dictionary definition of *blessing*, which is actually “approval” or “encouragement.”² It’s what you might think of if, say, your child comes and asks your blessing for a new endeavor. You don’t have the power to give them the things they may eventually achieve. You can only offer your approval and encouragement. Usually, that’s all they want or need.

Reading Matthew’s Beatitudes, we might hear Jesus pushing back against the cultural presumptions of his day—and even of ours. That presumption is that God especially blessed wealthy people, bold people, even smart people. Jesus seems to be saying something very different. Jesus says that God approves of and encourages the meek and the merciful, I think he is also saying that God approves of and encourages the person whose path seems unfortunate and difficult.

What Jesus said stood out, because it’s not what his hearers expected. Two thousand years later, in our culture of competition and accrual, it’s hard to *truly* believe. That’s an important thing to notice at a time when some pretend to lack the resources to care for all sick people, and others have returned to punishing poor people because they are poor. We are all already residents of the Kingdom of God, even if that Kingdom has yet to be fully realized.

Let’s notice one more thing about blessing: it’s a two-way conversation. I can bless you; you can bless me. And, God blesses us, and we bless God. That can be hard to get our heads around. When we say, “Let us bless the Lord,” we offer our approval and encouragement back to God. It’s an amazing thought, that every one of us can say those words, and that it means something. It also infers that each of us is in direct and personal relationship with God. The question is not whether we *have* that relationship, but rather whether we *accept* it. Maybe the acceptance of our relationship with God is all it takes to make a saint. If we’re *fortunate*, we get just enough grace to do that.

In preparing for today’s sermon, I read the All Saints’ sermon I delivered last year. Among my words were these:

We are at the tail end of a dreadful election season. On Tuesday, most of us will be going to the polls to cast our votes for the next President.

Polls show that more than half of Americans, Democrat and Republican, are experiencing anxiety about the election.³ If you are among that anxious majority, you are not alone.

And later:

We will all be very glad when this election is over. Remember, no matter how it turns out, God is working on the long plan.⁴

Yes, it has been nearly a year since the Presidential election. As it turned out, few of us felt “glad” by the time the last polls closed. Anxiety only increased since then. I think it is still increasing. I wish I had a recipe for dealing with it. I do think it helps to remember that God *is* working on the long plan.” There’s nothing that affirms that like a baptism.

The next big thing going on at St. Thomas’s today is this: very shortly, *we* are going to baptize Gabriel Luke Thomas-Rubenstein. As part of the baptismal rite, we will offer prayers for him and for the world. As always, the last petition is for those who have died. Because it is All Saints’ Sunday, we will chant the names of those you all asked to remember. It may seem like an odd moment, to interject the prayers for the dearly departed into the prayers for this beautiful baby. But it’s actually completely appropriate. Through mementos and candles, we have called forth the memories of our loved ones. Whether you believe it is literally true, we will have conjured their presence among us. Among the holy ones of God, we will serve as God’s agents to baptize young Gabriel and thereby initiate him into the Body of Christ.

The final words of the baptismal liturgy are these, and we say them together: “We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.” [BCP, 308] Through baptism, Gabriel joins the Communion of Saints, dead, living, and yet-to-come. We are the agents of God who make that pronouncement. We are the agents of God who both perform and witness that powerful act of hope and love.

Like every generation, Gabriel carries God’s promise forward. God bless Gabriel. God bless the world into which he will walk. God bless us as we endeavor to bring the Kingdom of God just one knife edge closer to fruition.

Notes

¹ “Being Mortal,” an episode of the PBS/CPTV documentary series *Frontline*, originally aired February 10, 2015. At the time of writing, it was available for streaming at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/being-mortal/> (accessed November 4, 2017).

² “blessing” the Merriam-Webster Dictionary online, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blessing> (accessed November 4, 2017).

³ American Psychological Association, “APA Survey Reveals 2016 Presidential Election Source of Significant Stress for More Than Half of Americans,” October 13, 2016, available online at <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2016/10/presidential-election-stress.aspx> (accessed November 5, 2016).

⁴ Keri Aubert, from a sermon preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, November 6, 2016.