

All Saints Sunday, Year C, November 3, 2019. Luke 6:20-31.

There is a tension in our celebration today, I think, between a generous, imaginative universalism and a more hard-edged particularism. Everything is holy, comes from God and can show us the way to God—and, here is what it means to live in God’s love, and woe to those who rely on the things outside of God. This tension just might run through much of the faith of us nice, enlightened Christians who know that God loves everyone and suspect that God also cares about truth and wants us to stand for something. If we pay attention, the tension in our celebration today can teach us something not just about the feast of All Saints, but about the God who loves and calls us into being.

From time to time throughout the year, the church remembers particular saints: Peter and Paul and Mary and Martha; Hildegard and Thomas and Francis; Christopher and Martin Luther King. The saints, generally, are those who have been publicly acknowledged as reliable witnesses to God. They are people whose lives, if we look, will reliably point us toward that divine love that is our goal and home. But with this definition of saints, we can see that almost anyone or even anything is a saint, if we have enough imagination, curiosity, and generosity. And indeed, part of the reason we have All Saints Day is that there are more saints than there are days. So we take one day and throw in the whole communion of saints, the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and continue to surround us.

The day calls us, among other things, to an appreciative, arms-wide look at all of the uncountable ways that God’s grace is at work in our neighbors and the world, gently subtly insistently pointing: look, look, there’s God, there’s grace, there’s love. In this sense, it is a profoundly counter-cultural day—when we are all so occupied with the important work of hunting out evil, All Saints and its Sunday pull us back to look for the older stronger gentler good that is our first gift from God.

And into this beautiful meadow where holiness grows wild and free, Luke brings the flaming torch of his bizarro world Beatitudes, that aren’t content to tell us who is blessed, but have to press on to the woes, as well. Luke’s Jesus seems less interested in seeking out the holy everywhere, and instead starkly tells us what makes for blessing and what makes for woe. (It is probably worth pointing out that the “woes” here may not be equivalent to “cursed.” I read a commentary this week that suggested we should translate this “woe” as “Yikes!” a klaxon banging away annoyingly but helpfully to let us know that we are in danger.)

God loves everyone and blesses everything and we can see signals of God’s grace in any person; *and* God has rather strong preferences for how we conduct ourselves. We are to conduct ourselves as members of the kin-dom of God, that communion of which the saints are the model citizens. It is a people with radical customs, of having and loving enemies, of doing good to those who hate them, of praying for those who abuse them. It is a society based on giving everything away, of treating others how we’d like to be treated, without insisting that they reciprocate. These very customs point us back to tension and hard edges: we can’t love enemies

if we don't have them; we can't do good to our haters if our stance is so limp that no one would bother to hate us.

The impulse behind today is right: anyone and indeed anything can point us to God. And Luke is right: God is not just universal affirmation or transcendent politeness. God has a character that cares for the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the reviled and the excluded. And while a long hard look can find sanctity anywhere, that glimpsed sanctity is going to be an instance of this world upside down love. The world is charged with the grandeur of God through and through, and that grandeur is love given away freely, hungry people coming to a full table, the oppressed leaping for joy, strangers meeting each other's needs as friends.

This is sanctity that we can not only glimpse but, at times, embody through God's grace. We look to the saints in hopes that they will help us see God. We look to the saints to teach us how to love and be loved by God. We look to them so that we can be like them in the virtuous and godly living that leads to the ineffable joy of those who love God. Amen.