

It is good for us to be together this morning.

Today we are celebrating the feast of All Saints'. Well really we are celebrating two days on our church calendar in one. We are celebrating All Saints' to be sure which hold up in front of us those whom we recognize as exemplars in the faith those who we might draw inspiration from, whose lives were given to the Gospel either in death as a martyr or in service their whole lives long. This celebration of All Saints' goes back as far as the 9th century.

The other day we are celebrating is All Soul's day which is a commemoration of those more familiar to us, our beloved family and friends who have gone into the nearer presence of the lord. These are the ones we will sing about in a little while that you can meet at school or in lanes or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops or at tea, for the saints of god are just folk like me and I mean to be one too. By the 10th century this observance began in monastic communities and soon spread out into the wider Christian world.

Both of these are theologically grounded in our understanding of the Communion of Saints. That we are all tied together in the body of Christ by virtue of our baptism and participation in the Paschal Mystery. We are no where and at no time closer to the ones we love but see no longer than at the Eucharist. There is a dimension of time beyond time opened up and we participate in endless pilgrimage to receive the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven which we are caught up in with all the saints.

And that line between what we have been calling in youth group the Capitol S saints and the lowercase S saints can be pretty wide and straight or pretty thin and arbitrary. Certainly I believe in a deep dimension of holiness that humanity can aspire to and is witness to in those revered persons like St. Francis or St. Matthew, or St. Theresa of Avila. These people have let grace have its particular way with them so completely that there is no question about their contribution to Christian life. But there are others, like us who are more conflicted maybe no less faithful even in our intention to be faithful, but we remain conflicted. I would like to take a look at our Gospel text and see a little blurring of the line that Jesus is up to. And I think we'll do it three dimensions... three alliterative dimensions...

Setting, Song, and finally Saints.

First, the setting. These are familiar words of Jesus that he preaches in Matthew's Gospel. We know it there as part of the Sermon on the Mount. And if we are not careful we might miss something important Luke is trying to tell us about Jesus' message. The mountain is the location of prayer. It is also the location of his choosing of the 12, if you like the capitol S saints or the capitol A apostles. But where does Jesus go to deliver this famously important message?

Verse 17 which came before our reading this morning says that he came down with the Capitol esses and stood on a *level place* with the crowd. Jesus has taken his stand with human beings and identifies with them even in his baptism, even in his choosing to stand on level ground with them. And Luke lists who all came, from as far as Jerusalem, Judea, Tyre, and Sidon, and Morrison, and Manchester, and McMinnville, and Centertown. You get the idea. This was not an exclusive invitation. In fact it seems like Jesus could not keep them away even if he wanted

to. And these are not curious intellectuals looking to lock ideological horns with Jesus or have something snarky to post on Twitter (by the way as a quick sidebar, I don't think we would have any revered capitol ess Saints if Twitter had existed in the Ancient world. Maybe and I hope I'm wrong, but you start digging through people's social media posts and Saint or not there might be some ugly stuff...

Anyhow, this crowd were people from all over who were in need, who have experience all that the world can do to you, victims of circumstance, sickness, troubled, poor, they just wanted to touch Jesus, with the hope that any type of contact would make them whole.

So now that we have the setting, what about the song. What Jesus says to this assembled crowd of lower case esses... to the saints of god who are just folk like me, is something that is rooted way back in his tradition. There were blessings and curses shouted from the tops of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerezim. A blessing for obedience to the commandments of the Lord, and a curse for disobedience. While Jesus is drawing on this tradition, he leaves out the contingency of human behavior. That is, there is no *if you do this...* clause.

I think also Jesus has in mind a song. A song his mother sang certainly before he was born, but I'd like to think also in his growing up years. To us the Ever Blessed Virgin Mary, Theotokos the God Bearer, but to Jesus a lower case m, mom who sang in the kitchen. Jesus has in mind that reversal that his mother sang about:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has taken a tradition about blessing and cursing, and a birthright from the prophets and even his own mother that speaks directly into the hearts of those who have been beat up by the world, and says even if you can't get your act together, even if you want to and it is impossible to shout down all the other voices inside your own head, or the ones in your neighborhood, this is how things are going to be from now on:

'Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
'Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

And there are no strings attached. Jesus is speaking a new reality into being, and challenging us to believe it really exists. Jesus is able to call forth these realities into a world that would have nothing of it. He is not giving advice or filler text for greeting cards. He is binding up the destiny of everybody into one whether we like it or not.

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
'Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
'Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

Those who have not cared about what happens to the least vulnerable people among us will not be able to live in a safe neighborhood. But there is not cosmic retribution, just the natural consequences of their actions.

So we have the setting, we've heard the song, so what does this have to do with saints. Capitol S or small s, I think what Jesus is asking is for us to take a look at our labels. We ought to re-evaluate our categories of who belongs and who doesn't. Take some of the capitol S's down and lift us some of the Small ones. I don't know if it is necessary to take St. Antony the Great the desert-dwelling, demon-fighting monk down a notch so that someone else can be lifted up. I guess that is sort of the whole point, that there is room in the Communion of Saints for all of us, and we can recognize that fellowship more and more as we let grace wash over us and change us.

One more song...

I have flirted several times with teaching a class called something to the effect of the Gospel According to Tom Waits. I think Tom Waits who is a capital S songwriter is fantastic. He has this song that I played in our youth group this week called, "Down There by the Train." It has in it a tinge of this reversal theology that Jesus is proclaiming, that the Magnificat puts words around. Tom Waits paints a picture of the Communion of Saints moving along at the pace of a very slow train. He exhorts the listener to take advantage of this special grace:

There's a place I know where the train goes slow
Where the sinner can be washed in the blood of the lamb
There's a river by the trestle down by sinner's grove
Down where the willow and the dogwood grow

Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there where the train goes slow

And that is a familiar Gospel theme that we've heard lots of times. But in the next verse he begins to list all the names that will be included on the train's manifest. It is the poetic interpretation of lifting the conflicted and unworthy lowercase S saints, of elevating us out of the confusion and struggle of life, maybe not even while we're still alive, but we will have a place sometime. He says:

There's a golden moon that shines up through the mist
And I know that your name can be on that list
There's no eye for an eye, there's no tooth for a tooth

I saw Judas Iscariot carrying John Wilkes Booth
He was down there by the train

What a poignant image of what it looks like for sinners to be walking each other home.

I pray that you have loved well and grieve well those who are now absent among us but present with the Lord. I pray that you find a special affinity, a spiritual friend among the Capitol S saints whose words you can read, whose life you can emulate, I also pray that if the grief of this life doesn't overtake you, or even when it does that you don't sell yourself short, and take your place among the communion of saints living into the blessedness that Jesus has spoken into the world and working toward its fulfillment in the lives of all the saints of God who are just people like us. All of us.