

Saintly Vulnerability

Year C, All Saints Sunday – Luke 6:20-31

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, November 6, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Most Episcopalians are familiar with the Church Year, that great cycle of prayer and liturgy that takes us from Advent through Christmas and Epiphany, on through Lent and Easter, and into the loooooong stretch of Sundays after Pentecost. Unless you are a regular at our mid-week services, (Wednesday at 12:10 – plug) you may be *less* familiar with the so-called Lesser Feasts and Fasts. While most of the saints and great lights of the Church have a special feast day or celebration assigned to them throughout the year, it is rare that they get a mention in Church on Sundays for the simple reason that the assigned Sunday readings nearly always takes precedence.

It's a pity, really, because there's really a lot we can learn from the lives of the saints. Some were great scholars, others illiterate. Some lived at the first centuries of the life of the Church, others are from the twentieth. What is particularly striking about the calendar of the saints, though, is that it is a hodge-podge – messy and unpredictable. Because the date of their celebration is generally associated with the day of their passing from this world to the next, in the calendar of the blessed, saints come and go in no particular order. Ninth-century saint follows twentieth. European, African, American. young, old. pauper, king. Whatever.

Just in the month of November, for instance, ancient Willibrord, whose feast is kept... tomorrow on the *seventh*, hobnobs with Reformation-era Richard Hooker, from last week on the third, and medieval Margaret of Scotland, on the sixteenth. It must make for some very interesting conversations in *very* high places.

You know, it's like that in our own lives, too, isn't it? People come to us in no particular order. Obviously, family is like that – we may *try* to exercise some limited control in planning our children, but every parent knows just how limited *that* really is. And most of us very quickly concede that we take no responsibility at all for the actions, or attitudes, or even the *existence* of our siblings. Though we often impute order to their presence among us *after* the fact, our friends, even the most intimate among them, usually appear to us seemingly out of *nowhere*. Truth be told, we didn't have much to say about the members of our *parish* family either – we're just kind of stuck with each other.

Those described as blessed, the *saints* in our gospel text today are *also* a pretty mixed lot – perhaps what me might view as an unfortunate and *desperate* lot, as a matter of fact. The Blessed are not particularly popular. The Blessed are not particularly well-off. The Blessed are not *at all* prosperous. They are, in fact, the poor. They are the hungry. They are the weeping and the despised. If these saints have *anything* in common, it is perhaps that these are those that are *not* in control of *anything*.

It doesn't take any control to be poor, it just happens. No one goes *looking* to be grief-stricken, it gets thrust on any of us who care enough in the first place. Some of us are *hungry* anytime we miss a meal by a few hours, but the *truly* hungry yearn to be filled. The ones that Jesus calls blessed are more often than not those that we would describe as vulnerable, as victims. And *no* one – martyrs and saints included – *no* one *wants* to be victimized. *No* one wants to be used. No one wants to be manipulated. No one wants to be cheated. We read the paper, or watch the news, or scroll through our network feed, and we shake our heads as we learn of all the evil things our fellow human beings are capable of. And we certainly do *not* want such things to happen to *us*.

And yet, here at the end of this part of his sermon on the mount, Jesus calls us to be *exactly* that vulnerable. We are, he says, to do good to those who hate us, to bless those who curse us and pray for those who abuse us. If anyone strikes us, we are to offer the other cheek, to give our shirt to the one who

has taken our coat, to give to everyone who begs. Because somewhere in our fear of being hurt, our fear of being made a victim, somewhere in our avoidance of being made the victim, we may *also* lose our ability to be *vulnerable*. We might lose our ability to take a *chance* on another human being, to take a chance on *life*, to take a chance – on *God*. To be sure, if we open ourselves to others, it is quite *possible*, some might say quite *likely*, that we will be hurt. But unless we *take* that risk, unless we take that chance, unless we pray for those that despise us, unless we refuse to ask back what is taken from us, unless we turn the other cheek, we may find ourselves living lives of fear and loneliness, lives devoid of human warmth and caring, lives empty of the love that Christ has so freely given us, lives not *worth* the living.

As it turns out, then, the saints *do* have something in common, in *spite* of their variety of age and culture and station. Regardless of the time or circumstances in which they lived their lives, the ones we call *saints* today were willing to be open, willing to be vulnerable, willing to be fully *human*. They were willing to take chances on others, even when it may have seemed to go against every *grain* of common sense, even when it seemed to go against their own *self-interest*, even when it seemed to go against their very *survival*.

The saints of God *are* saints not only because they were willing to be open to the call of the Holy Spirit, but because they were *also* willing to be vulnerable and open to the call of the spirits of all those around them.

Like it or not, each of *us* is given *plenty* of opportunity to experience such vulnerability in our own lives – at work, at home, among our friends, and *sometimes* at church, as well. Though we may never make it onto some calendar of saintliness, we *too* can determine our state of blessing by our openness to the needs of those the Lord puts within our reach.

We will not *always* be good. It is not at all likely that we will get it right the first time – or the second – or the third, or the fourth. To be sure, we will *certainly* sometimes fail, and we will *surely* sometimes fail. There will be *plenty* of opportunities to witness to and to accept our own vulnerability. But sainthood, you see, has less to do with meeting some... *unattainable* moral perfection, and much *more* to do with living a life marked by *openness* to those around us, marked by commitment to one another's needs.

Blessedness involves a radically different way of seeing the *everything*. Blessedness requires a worldview that *embraces* the poor, and the hungry, and the grieving, and the hurting, and the exiled, and the remnant, and the refugee, and the outcast, and the other than exactly like ourselves. Blessedness looks for such openness, not just for the rewards promised by our Lord in this morning's gospel lesson, not even to avoid the woes added here in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, but because we recognize our *own* vulnerable humanity, because we are open to see our *selves*, in the very *least* of those whose lives we touch with our own broken blessedness.

May we all be so blessed!