

Holy Humility

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

November 1, 2020 - All Saints' Day

Texts: Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34, 1 John 3:1-3,

Matthew 5:1-12 (The Beatitudes)

SCRIPTURE READING Revelation 7:9-17 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

RESPONSIVE READING adapted from Psalm 34

I will bless you, my God, at all times; your praise will fill my mouth.

My soul boasts in you; let the humble hear and be glad.

Taste and see, touch and feel the presence of the Beloved.

When I looked for help, you answered me, and saved me from my fears.

Those who look to you radiate kindness; their faces shine with compassion.

Taste and see, touch and feel the presence of the Beloved.

When this poor soul cried, you heard, and saved me from every trouble.

Your angel encamps around those who know you, and delivers them.

Taste and see, touch and feel the presence of the Beloved.

Taste and see that God is good; happy are those who take refuge there.

You saints, show reverence; for those who revere the Comforter lack nothing.

Taste and see, touch and feel the presence of the Beloved.

SCRIPTURE READING 1 John 3:1-3 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when the Holy One is revealed, we will be holy too, for we will see Holiness in truth. And all who have this hope may purify themselves, just as our Redeemer is pure.

I have heard that tears carry toxins out of our bodies. Scientifically true or not, I like to believe that tears help heal us of the troubles and sorrows we carry within ourselves. The strangest things can trigger tears: a sentimental greeting card, an unexpected kindness. A smell or sound evokes the memory of a loved one who died long ago, and the tears flow again. Sometimes tears take us by surprise and embarrass us; men, especially, got the message early on that tears are a sign of weakness. What happens to the toxins when tears are held inside? Do they simply build up in the body, erupting eventually as anger, or smashing the spirit into depression? On All Saints' Day, we set aside time to remember, and maybe weep. We release whatever hurt we carry to the earth, to the air, to God: all of them are generous in receiving our pain. Or we use Halloween, "All Hallows' Eve," the day before to vent our sadness in holy hilarity, dressing up in wild costumes, and trying on new personalities: witch or ghost, pirate or princess.

Both our tears and our spooky fun reflect a truth that seems universal: at this time of year, the veil between heaven and earth grows thin. A little more light leaks away every day; we feel closer to the world beyond this world. We remember. Maybe we weep. But what happens is healing. A poem called "The Unbroken" describes this; here it is, in part:

There is a brokenness
out of which comes the unbroken,
a shatteredness
out of which blooms the unshatterable.
There is a sorrow
beyond all grief which leads to joy,
and a fragility
out of whose depths emerges strength.
There is a hollow space
too vast for words
through which we pass with each loss,
out of whose darkness
we are *sanctified* into being.¹

We are sanctified: we are made saints. That is our true being, our real humanity. It sounds backwards, doesn't it? It's our weakness that makes us stronger, our sadness and brokenness that make us saints. Think about the people you've known that you might call saints. Was it their heroic deeds or great accomplishments that sanctified them in your eyes? Or did they simply go

¹ Rashani Réa, quoted in *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Francis Weller. Italics mine.

about life, loving and giving and taking care of whatever came their way, doing “small things with great love?”² Did they walk around with long faces, to remind you that life is a burden, or (as we read in the psalm) were they radiant, their faces shining with compassion? “Being holy does not mean being perfect; it means being whole, [complete]. Being holy does not mean being exceptionally religious...or godly; it means being truly human.”³

Maybe this is why Jesus is so much easier to relate to than the abstraction we sometimes call God. I’m no psychologist, but I think it sometimes works like this: because we are ashamed of our own failures, we invent a god who is a frowning judge calling out our mistakes or sins. We project all our self-criticism onto him (or her, but my imaginary being, at least, is a he), and then feel justified in rejecting him for being so hard on us. That’s not God, that’s our warped way of getting around the pain we carry. Jesus is holy precisely because he is human. He broke all the rules and irritated the stuffing out of the real religious people. He never promised to make Israel great again. He ate and drank and laughed and loved and touched ordinary people to heal their broken hearts. And in the end the most human thing he did was the thing all humans do sooner or later - he died. He didn’t command an army of angels to defend him; he didn’t even ask his disciples to do it. He told Peter to put away his sword. Was it weakness, or was it strength that he let them break his body? He died because his world could not accept his way of being holy, being humble, being human.

The most saintly people I’ve known are the humblest. I think of St. Lila, in her 70s, raising a bunch of grandchildren because their parents had died. She still worked full time cleaning offices. Whenever I saw her, I’d ask, “How’re you doing, Lila?” The answer was always: “I’m healed and saved in the name of the Lord!” Her face radiated kindness. I think of St. Myron, a teacher who rode his bicycle to school every day, even the day it snowed so hard that when he got there school had been cancelled. When he prayed aloud, it was never for himself but always for peace in the world. His face shone with compassion. I think of St. David, professor of Indian philosophy, whose courses were the most popular on campus. Whenever a student asked a question, no matter how dumb, he would beam and say, “What a good question!” and give a profound and stimulating answer. I think of the young African man in a group of European “Moonies” in Senegal. They were kind but a little weird; but this man, the only African, wore the widest smile. He noticed my ripped backpack and took it away to stitch it up for me, with sturdy crooked stitches. All of them would laugh out loud to know that I think of them as saints. It’s their humanity that makes them so, their love, and their utter lack of pretension. They are Christ’s own, whatever their color or creed or ethnic origin.

Beloved, do you know how much you are loved? Do you know that you are saints in the making? God’s judgements are always made in the service of love, for we are *already* called

² Attributed to Mother Teresa.

³ William Stringfellow, quoted in *All Saints*, edited by Robert Ellsberg.

children of God; Christ himself is not ashamed to call us brother, sister. What we *will* be has not yet been revealed. But we know this: we will be holy and perfectly human, as Christ himself is holy, the humblest, best, most human person who ever lived. And one day you, too, will join in chorus with all the saints you have ever known, in glory, where there will be no hunger or thirst or scorching heat; and every tear will be wiped from your eyes; you will have no need of tears, for all the toxins of shame and sadness will be tenderly wiped from your souls. And Jesus the risen Lamb will be your light and your guide. AMEN. Thanks be to God.

Prayers - Joys and Concerns

**As part of this service of remembrance, I invite you to share just the names of those saints no longer living whose lives of faith shaped your life and faith. If your words overlap with someone else's, that's all right

**God of all saints, those known to all and those known only to you. Bring us closer to holy humility and to our true humanity. Let our faces shine with compassion:

**For people everywhere, fighting for dignity and whole personhood; we remember our brothers and sisters in Nigeria, in our own cities, in HongKong, in Nagorno-Karabakh;

**For our nation, this Tuesday, as we exercise the rights for which others fought and died; may every voice be heard and every vote fairly counted; protect the safety of all judges and poll workers and the integrity of every polling place;

**Teach us tenderness for all those who suffer with illness of any kind, and especially those living in isolation as covid numbers rise again; we hold in your healing Light all we name in our hearts. Be with us now as we taste and see, touch and feel your goodness, truly present with us.

AMEN

Communion

The night before his death at the hands of people gone astray, led to act against their own best interests by short-sighted and faithless leaders, Jesus took bread and gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat. This is my body, a human body like your own, a gift from God, which I give for you. Do this, and remember me."

Again, after supper, he took the cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to all of them to drink, saying:

"This cup is my promise to you of forgiveness and freedom, of peace within and to share.

Take and drink. This is my life, poured out for you.

Do this, and remember me.

For I will not eat and drink again in this way until I share the feast with you and all saints in the kingdom of God to come."