

IT'S STILL THERE

A sermon for All Saints Sunday ~ 5 November 2017

There is a special day care center in Jersey City, New Jersey, run by Roman Catholic sisters. Children in this daycare center belong to families who are homeless, who have moved from place to place, and in this daycare center, these children have finally found a touch of home. One day the sisters took the children to the Jersey shore. None of these 3 and 4 year olds had ever seen the ocean. They scrambled up the sandy dunes, falling and giggling their way to the top of what must have seemed to them like mountains. They could hardly believe their eyes. As far as they could see, water. Nothing but water. They slid down the dunes and ran to the ocean's edge. They chased the waves which teased their toes. Then, they all went off for a picnic in a nearby park. After lunch, the sisters let them return to the shore. One little boy outran the rest and climbed his way to the top of the dunes. He stood up and looked out. Then he turned around, with his arms spread wide, and he shouted to the others: "It's still there!"

For this child, in his three short years, so much had disappeared. He turned around and all that was familiar was gone. In his world, even the ocean could disappear over lunch. We are older. And wise enough to know the ocean will be there when we look again. We don't even have to drive there to prove it. We don't expect the ocean to disappear, but we too, like the children, have experienced loss. Loss goes hand in hand with life and especially with transition. And this community has been in transition for a long time. Sometimes in transition, what counts as loss for one may count as gain for another. And what counts as gain for one may count as loss for another. I am mindful after almost a month among you that you are all over the place on this. It is what it is. So I hope today especially you will give yourselves permission to just BE with that. Be with where you are on that, wherever it is.

Today, on All Saints Sunday, we are especially mindful of the loss of our loved ones who have died. Priest Lisa didn't die; she was called to another church. But many of you are grieving *that* loss too, in addition to the losses of those who have died this year. We post, on the prayer wall in the narthex, or lobby, the names of those we want to remember this month. During the prayers, we name those from St. John's who died this past year, and we ring a bell to mark that remembrance. We will also have the opportunity during the prayers to name *any* loved ones who have died, not just in the past year but in any year. And if any of you want to name Lisa, go for it. She did not die. But your unique relationship in time, with her as your charismatic and creative rector, did die. And as with the saints in our lives, you may want to honor, remember, and offer up in gratitude a gift of significance for you.

It is no coincidence that we remember these loved ones who have died at this particular time of the year. Everything around us points to the natural cycle of life, the reality of decay and death as the leaves turn and drop to the ground, as the days grow shorter and the air turns cool. "Change and decay in all around I see," goes the favorite old hymn. We're not unlike that little child for whom the ocean could disappear overnight. But the next phrase of that hymn is this: "Oh thou who changest not, abide with me."

There's the crux of what this day is about. In the midst of the change and decay, of the loss and grief, there is something, there is someone, who *is* still there. And remembering the saints gives us a glimpse of who or what that is.

So think for a moment about someone from your life whom you would consider to be a saint. What animated that person? What was it about that person that qualifies him or her for sainthood

status in your book? I'm guessing it wasn't how much money they made, or what kind of car they drove, or how big or how nice their house was, or how successful they were professionally.

Today is a perfect day for me to remember that one saint in my book is Father Robert Miller, great grandfather to John *Robert* Hall who joins the great blessed communion of saints today through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. When I knew Father Bob he was a retired Episcopal priest. He and his "first wife" Lucianne, as he was fond of calling his only wife, were members of St. John's in their retirement. And my goodness, he was one vibrant, robust beacon of life, joy, encouragement, humor, humility and depth. I still have notes from one of his sermons scrawled on a scrap of a Sunday bulletin in my file. His greatest gift to me was the reminder not to take myself too seriously. And I believe he did not come by that piece of wisdom easily.

A little boy, a few years older than John Robert, was asked what a saint is. He worshipped every week with his parents in an old church with stained glass windows. And week in and week out he would see outlines of people depicted in those windows. So naturally he said, "A saint is someone who lets the light shine through." And there you have it. A saint is someone who lets the light shine through.

St. John, the saint for whom our community of faith is named, calls *Christ* the Light. Think about it: light is illuminating, warm, healing, dispelling darkness, revealing truth, filling all space...light. In the gospel of John, John the Baptist was "to bear witness to the Light, that all might through him believe." His was a rather unique calling. But so is yours. So is mine. So is ours. We can be who we are, with the lives God gave us, living out the calling unique to each of us, and let the light shine through.

Here's the thing about stained glass windows: the pieces are broken, irregular, jagged. But together they form a beautiful whole. Our God is an artist who creates with the lives of the saints, which includes your life and mine. Out of the broken pieces of our lives, every texture, every shape, every color, God fashions windows for the light of Christ to shine through. And that is true not only of our lives as individuals but of our collective life as a community of faith called St. John's. We are broken, individually and collectively. And somehow God makes us whole. As we move on through the gains and losses, the losses and gains of transition after transition in this life, it is the light of Christ that remains. And as we consent to the presence and action of that light within, God makes us whole.

Today we receive that light in such earthy forms: water, bread, and wine. When we come to the table and extend our hands we offer nothing but the broken, jagged edged fragments of our lives. We give them to the artist with a capital A to refashion, reshape and reframe. And all the while the same light that fills Priest Lisa, that filled Bob and Lucianne Miller, that filled your loved ones and mine – that light still shines. Sometimes it seems to hide behind a cloud for a while, but in time, the clouds will part and you will see -- it's still there. It's still there. Amen.

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