

Feast of All Saints, Cycle A

Revelations 7:2-4, 9-14; 1John 3:1-3; and Matthew 5:1-12a

Ah, the Feast of All Saints! Time to remember all the wonderful souls we have known and how they have contributed to the goodness of the world! This feast is needed more than ever this year because it can inspire us to endure the upheavals and burdens we currently carry as a nation. Whether we are giving up, overcome by loneliness or climbing the walls, the countless saints we celebrate this Sunday underscores the enduring truth: everyone will eventually be transformed by God's love.

Each of this Sunday's readings has an encouraging song to sing. 1John tells us, "See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are." Saintliness is a gift from God and God gives it to each one of us. We do not need to earn it. How marvelous! It can be easy to pay attention only to what is wrong within ourselves or to avoid self-awareness altogether. Yet, as St. Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "Humanity, take a good look at yourself. Heaven and earth, all of creation dwells inside of you. You are the world – everything is hidden in you." Because the Spirit breathes inside each of us, we have all we need to be saints.

All Saints Day is like a gigantic family reunion. At a family reunion, we easily see ourselves as part of an interrelated community. All these folks look like us! What's more, everyone plays their part in the family's story and everyone makes their contribution. We are all ordinary and yet "characters," each in our own right. Our newspaper has been publishing a page of short articles each week, highlighting the lives of Philadelphians who have died of COVID-19. It is wonderful to see how unique each person's focus was and also how similarly they loved and were loved. Not surprisingly then, Revelations presents us with two visions of vast crowds before the throne of God. In the first vision, the group numbers 144,000 people from the twelve tribes of Israel. 144,000, which is $12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$, emphasizes how the covenant between God and the members of an interrelated community has developed into a perfection that encompasses all people. In the second vision, the multitude of saints before God's throne is too great to count and comes from every part of the world. Everyone – even you – is a saint.

These visions disrupt the flow of Revelations. Seven seals are being opened, signaling the reality of increasing persecution and destruction. These two visions of joyous worship insert themselves just before the seventh seal is broken. This is not a flash-forward but the real-time reality that, for those who belong to God, no amount of racism, election struggles or pandemic death can interrupt our communion with God and one another. We find further solace in the seals on the foreheads of the worshippers. Ancient kings used seals to indicate what belonged to them; a seal also showed that these people had the king's protection. They were safe. Famous saints, the big ones who get their own feast on the Church calendar, were aware of this protection and boldly participated in life because of it.

Knowing we have been sealed in this way gives us the strength to be the people the Beatitudes describe. Jesus asks us to act in ways that are counter-cultural and counter-instinctual. Why would we want to be meek, to mourn, to be peacemakers or to rejoice when persecuted? Jesus' reasoning invites us to live as residents of the Kingdom of God, one foot in the present and one foot in the future. Time is not linear here at all! Each beatitude says if we endure suffering now, we are blessed now because of a future promise. Our indignant response may be that our current suffering really hurts. However, as my parents were always quick to point out, this life is a vale of tears for everyone. If we remain aware of the larger story taking place, we can move toward a vastly more satisfying good than any other more immediate blessing can bring. And we do move together; note how each beatitude is about a group of people. Holiness is communal. Holiness is possible. Holiness is happening now. Hooray!

- ❖ Reminisce about five-ten people whose goodness has blessed your life. Give thanks for each one.
- ❖ What goodness do you lack the courage to do? Ask God for help and make a plan to try.

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