

Sunday, November 7, 2010
All Saints' Sunday

Daniel 7:1–3, 15–18
Psalm 149
Ephesians 1:11–23
Luke 6:20–31
Year C

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

*God of all time, God of all space,
into the dying of the year
we call your faithful presence.
Into the fading of lives and of dreams
we summon your unfailing promises.
Strengthen us with the vision of your new Jerusalem.
Encourage us with the singing of the heavenly congregation.
Lead us on the path of justice and peace
to the holy city where you dwell,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen*

In the town of Rutland, Vermont, my home for six and a half years, the biggest event of the year takes place on Reformation Day, October 31. No, they don't host a concert. No, they don't have a celebration of Brother Martin nailing the 95 Theses. I'm not even talking about trick or treating. In Rutland, every year on All Hallows' Eve, at 6:30 pm, the town holds a parade. And it is huge. Fire Departments haul out their shiny new trucks and their spruced up antiques. The Rutland High School Marching Band and every surrounding town's Marching Band blast away. The Killington Ski Resort, the Rutland Regional Medical Center, other Major and Minor Employers, School Groups, Girl and Boy Scouts, Veterans, the Masons, let's just say everyone is there, either on a float, marching, or cheering. And there is plenty of diving for candy thrown at the curb.

Why this town of 20,000 holds the biggest event of the year, reportedly the longest-running Halloween Parade anywhere, is a head scratcher. I have heard some say that it cuts down on neighborhood trick-or-treating shenanigans run amok, which may be true. But also I think it gives those in the Northern climes one more excuse to laugh in the dark days of fading autumn. In the face of increasing darkness, the feast of All Hallows', when society and church converge to deal with death in ridiculous and sublime ways, in between the deadening foliage and the coming ravages of winter, why not have a parade?

And so we have one today. We parade throughout the church, recalling wise grandmothers and grandfathers in, silly old aunts and cranky uncles, crazy, kind, or brave cousins, our ancestors in faith, Sarah and Abraham, Miriam and Rahab, Paul and Apollos, cherubim and seraphim.

And while we parade, we join our lives with theirs. We join our deaths with theirs. We join life on earth with life in heaven.

Can you see it? Do you see the parade?

*The saints are standing row on row
engulfed in light and peace,
stand face to face with God their king
whose love will never cease.*

*King David sings with harp and lyre
He's cantor of the town,
and Mary sings Magnificat
before her low born son.*

*Now Simeon begins his song
with tambourine and drum
while Miriam and Hannah sing
ta-rum, ta-rum, ta-rum.*

*And Luther sings just like a swan,
while Johann Sebastian Bach,
the great, great Bach directs the choir,
Den store hvide flok*

*There's Louis Armstrong with his horn
And Israel with its psalms.
The pious take their usual place
and gravely wave their palms.
From every nation they have come
to sing in this great choir,
their music rises up to God
whose face is like a fire.*

-Author unknown; translated from the Dutch by Gracia Grindal
("Customs, prayers, and poems"; Liturgy: All Saints' among the Churches, vol. 12 no. 2, 1995)

We are not just standing by, admiring the heroes of past glory days. In truth, even those we would easily nominate for sainthood, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther himself, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Dorothy Day, as singular in their faithful activity as they were, were also flawed. The saints who are on the church calendar are actually as some who have pointed out, figures out of the Christian past who have been insufficiently researched.

Tom Long writes about this in a recent book about Funeral Practices. He says

In the New Testament, "saint" is not a label reserved for the rare person whose life shines with extraordinary holiness; it is used to describe the ordinary, garden-variety Christian. Baptism is a call to set out on a moral adventure in the name of Christ, but all Christians travel this path of discipleship hobbling and stumbling. When the evangelist Bill Graham was asked by a television interviewer about then-Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura's slam that "religion is a crutch," Graham responded, "Maybe, but who doesn't limp?"

--From Accompany them with Singing: The Christian Funeral (Louisville: WJK Press), p 124

Saints, God's holy ones, are you and me, washed with God's living water, marked with Christ's cross, oiled with the Holy Spirit's outpouring of gifts. In company with all the walking wet, we are called to march in the divine life while still here on earth.

This call is invoked in Jesus' teaching on level ground in Luke. Rather than a place high up, like a mountain, which in Luke is reserved for Jesus' time apart, this Sermon on the Plain launches or rather roots the social and economic agenda for Jesus' followers. It is in the macarisms, the "Blessed are you's" that describe sainthood in all its ordinariness, in its earthiness, in all its humanness. They are not spiritual like Matthew's Beatitudes. They are not predictive. They are indicative, that is naming the experience of those for whom Jesus came and for whom he died as blessed:

You who are poor
You who are hungry now
You who weep now
are blessed

God waits for you.

Alongside the macarisms, again in the indicative, are the woes, directed also for those whom Jesus came and for whom he died:

You who are rich
You who are full
You who are laughing
Woe! Whoa!

It will not always be so.

Death will have its way. The end will come. Terrible things will happen. Powers and oppressive forces will threaten good and innocent people. Elections will come and go.

This is the truth. This is the God's honest truth, that nothing lasts forever, except for God's promise of salvation, except that God gives life and the life that lasts to the holy ones, the

saints, the ones washed in the waters that connect saints one to another, and to Christ, who fills all in all.

Jesus in his teaching, Jesus in his healing, Jesus in his dying and rising, wants people to notice and jump into the stream of ever flowing and refreshing waters.

Jesus mentions those who abuse and who are in poverty alike, and levels them out.

We live in a world where power and enmity get the greatest attention. Jesus shows us that we can diffuse it.

We live in a world where great need and affliction are too easily dismissed. Jesus invites us to live generously.

Wentla Wick was arguably the poorest member of my congregation in Rutland, the same who that holds the annual Halloween Parade. Wentla wore scraps of cloth sewn or pinned around her body. She steadied herself on a broom handle when opening the door to her home, such as it was. Her teeth revealed gaps, and her face showed the weathering of years as a washerwoman. She was remarkable in many ways. She had strong opinions about the news of the day, which she read with squinty eyes and barked about much to my chagrin, as I usually had an alternate opinion. She lived in one room, slept on the couch, and had piles of stuff all over the place.

But Wentla lived into the ways of holiness and tapped into God's abundant grace. My encounters with her describe our life together in Christ. I would spot Wentla hunched over bags in the Price Chopper supermarket with a gaudy wool cap and offer a ride home. She would get in, and I would drive her there, all the way up her dirt driveway. Before I could do anymore she would literally throw cash at me and scramble out the door. When I protested, Wentla would say "cab fare!" People in the congregation would tell me that they got a birthday card from Wentla with her chicken scratch greeting, and ask me why in the world would Wentla enclose a ten-dollar bill?

One day visiting with her in her home, after communion, Wentla offered me ice cream cake. From what I had been told, accepting food from her would be a real act of faith not knowing how long it would have been in her refrigerator, but I consented. When I asked what was the occasion for this feast, Wentla said, "it's a remembrance." "Of what?," I asked. "Why of communion," Wentla said, with her twinkling eyes and gapped teeth. Blessed are you, Wentla, for yours is the kingdom of God.

I will remember Wentla today at communion. I will remember her and link her to Christ, and the saints. And to you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow saints, I invite all of you to a parade in New Haven, as you march down the aisle today, and this afternoon at my installation, where we share some food, and remember and rejoice, and leap for joy, with God's blessed dead, and for the life that lasts, with Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.