

**St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia
November 5, 2006
All Saints Sunday**

Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11

Ephesians 1:11-23

Luke 6:20-36

Some months ago I found myself looking ahead to that moment yesterday during the liturgy in the Washington Cathedral when I would hand over the primatial staff to my successor, Katharine Jefferts Schori. As I contemplated passing on that visible symbol of the Presiding Bishop's pastoral authority I wondered what I might do next. Just at that point I received the invitation to be with you today to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the life of this parish. That said to me: indeed there is life beyond being the Presiding Bishop. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you all for giving me the opportunity to be part of the life of this congregation on such a special occasion, and for welcoming Phoebe and me this morning as we move into our next chapter.

Of course, I come as no stranger to this community, which Phoebe and I were part of when I was rector of St. Martin in the Fields 21 years ago. Since then I have had the joy of serving first for 13 years as Bishop of Chicago and then as your Presiding Bishop and Primate.

The celebration of the Feast of All Saints – which we are keeping today – has become ever more meaningful for me through my years of ministry, and certainly these last nine years as I have traveled the country and the breadth of the Anglican Communion on behalf of the Episcopal Church. What we most truly celebrate today is not simply the passage of years or the construction of church buildings. Today we celebrate the unfathomable mystery and reality of the risen Christ who shows up in the seemingly ordinary circumstances of our lives: the risen Christ who insists on revealing himself in the lives of men and women like ourselves. Some of these men and woman have played a very public and prophetic role in the life of the church, and indeed the world. Others have lived lives of hidden goodness and service. They have been like the yeast hidden in the dough, which by its own secret working imparts its life to the whole.

The scripture readings we have just heard present us with a number of themes to consider as we celebrate both the anniversary of this parish and what it means to be members of Christ's risen body: filled with his own fullness. As St. Paul, your patron, tells us, to be filled with Christ's own fullness is to have, in some lesser or greater degree, the mind and consciousness of Christ, and therefore to be a vital and active member of his risen body. Such was the fundamental disposition of those we call saints, and such is the final disposition we are all called to have in virtue of our membership in Christ's body through baptism.

As we are filled with Christ's own fullness we acquire a capacity for God's mercy. In today's first reading we heard: "You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not stray, or else you may fall." What does it actually mean to wait for God's mercy?

A story once told by a Franciscan friar friend of mine sheds some light here. Finding himself in the presence of Dr. Karl Menninger, that pioneer in the area of mental health, my friend asked the great man what in his opinion was the fundamental cause of mental illness here in the United States. After a pause, Dr. Menninger replied that the primary cause of mental illness has to do with people's inability to forgive themselves for not being perfect.

In other words, self judgment can have a crippling effect upon our souls, and produce in us a bitterness of spirit that we direct not only against ourselves but outwardly against others as well.

However, as we are able to receive God's mercy, this tendency to self judgment is disarmed and compassion flows within us. This compassion allows us, as a wonderful phrase from Carl Jung has it, to extend to ourselves the alms of our own kindness. As well, it allows us to extend those same alms of kindness outward toward others.

"Never despair of God's mercy," says St. Benedict in a chapter of his Rule for monks which deals with the tools of good works. St. Benedict clearly understood that as his monastic brothers labored to perform their good works they would fail over and over again. He wisely anticipated that as a result of their failures they might fall into the slough of despond and find themselves imprisoned in a fortress of self castigation.

Benedict knew that it was essential for them, at such moments of self-directed hostility and frustration, to open themselves to the divine mercy. He knew that God in his mercy is far more generous to us than we ever are to ourselves.

Saints across the ages, whose lives we celebrate today, have understood this, as have countless others whose names appear in no calendar and whose lives have not been captured in stained glass.

These saints, canonized and uncanonized, share another quality I would describe as interior poverty. Today's gospel presents us with four beatitudes and four woes. The four beatitudes are paradoxical, inasmuch as the states of loss and grief and rejection become the narrow door through which we pass to a sense of fullness and joy. While, in contrast, the confidence and self-determination of affluence set before us in the four woes can become an experience of constriction and emptiness.

During these years as Presiding Bishop I have found myself in places in our world where extreme poverty is the order of the day. I once visited a poor section of Managua, Nicaragua and was invited into what I could only call a hovel by a husband and wife who joyfully set before me a small roasted chicken. Over my protests that they share the meal with me they insisted that I eat not simply part of the chicken but all of it. Of course, I did so deeply moved by their insistent generosity – realizing that this offering to me was a sacrifice for them. They had set before me, in some sense, a banquet, and the chicken, lovingly prepared, was more protein than they would have to eat themselves in a week. Their joy and delight in being able to feed me in the midst of their poverty made that meal a true moment of holy communion.

Safely back in my hotel later that evening it occurred to me that I have been known to go through the exercise of matching the quality of the wine chosen for a dinner party with how much the guests might be aware of the choice. The profligate generosity of my Nicaraguan hosts convicted me of my own penuriousness in the midst of what, from their perspective, could only have been unimaginable affluence.

Paradoxically, the more possessions we have, the more burdened and constrained we can feel until we are possessed by our possessions. And, I know this from the experience of these last months as Phoebe and I have

contemplated our move from New York. Over the years we have acquired more and more things, both on our own and as large pieces of ancestral furniture have come to us from our families. This has made each move increasingly burdensome and caused us to ask: what do we really need? What might we get rid of?

There is a caution here with such accumulation: though it is harmless enough to live with things we have actually forgotten that are gathering dust in an attic, it is dangerous to define ourselves in terms of our possessions, what we have.

And, this possession of physical things is a metaphor for something much greater – and that is an attitude of mind. This attitude invites us to clutch on to what we possess in terms of attitudes, opinions and biases. It deceives us into believing that our experiences of reality constitute the fullness of reality. It whispers to us that the truth we possess is the fullness of truth.

When we are freed from this attitude of mind we experience a freedom and undefendedness, a grace-filled spontaneity that allows us to meet new and demanding situations with attentiveness and availability. When we are thus freed it is possible for Christ to speak to us and to act freely through us – through our speech and actions.

Here we do well to remember the paradoxical words of Jesus that it is by not clinging and clutching to our lives but by losing them that we indeed find them. Or, to put it another way, drawing from the Zen tradition, when our storehouses burn down nothing is able to obscure the light of the moon.

This non-possessiveness, this freedom was a quality common to the saints. It allowed them to take risks and to stand in difficult places without fear because what most deeply grounded them and provided them with a sense of identity flowed from their companionship with Christ. They were not dependent on some sort of self-constructed and protected persona.

St. Francis, for example, shocked and outraged the people of Assisi by his rejection of everything that the society of his day valued. They were horrified by his radical embrace of what he perceived to be gospel poverty: a poverty that rendered him permeable to the riches that surrounded him in the wonder of creation.

We may not be called to be St. Francis but we are all called, through baptism, to that same disposition of heart which allows us to sit loose to what we possess – both objects and the attitudes and perspectives by which we define ourselves.

In a few moments we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism and receive Ryusei and Valentine into Christ's fellowship. When we do so we will renew our own baptismal covenant and affirm our willingness to be taken beyond ourselves, our self-definitions and self-judgments, into the wild and sometimes strange realm of God's profligate mercy and compassion. Through a series of questions we will be invited to allow our lives to be broken open by the Spirit of the risen Christ, who pours the love of God into our hearts in order that that same unbounded love can flow through us into the world around us in deeds and words that heal and reconcile and embody the gospel we proclaim.

On this the 150th anniversary of this great parish dedicated to St. Paul I pray that we, in the manner of the apostle himself, may find that the grace of Christ is at all times sufficient. I pray that the power of God at work in us may be revealed, not only in our strengths but also in our weaknesses. I pray that we will allow our fragile and finite humanity to become the vehicle for God's amazing grace. And may this grace, as it works its way into the fabric of our lives, bring wholeness and healing to the world around us, and to each of us as well.

“Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever.”

Amen.