November 1, 2026
All Saints' Day – Year A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Grace and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On All Saints' Day, we sing *all are one in thee, for all are thine!* Today, we celebrate our common bond with Christians of all times and places: people of every gender, of all ethnicities and races, of all sorts and conditions, joined together through baptism as one Body, seated together at the great heavenly banquet where there is, as the spiritual tells us, plenty good room.

Perhaps you have the experience of going to a gala dinner or wedding reception, and there's a push of people in the lobby trying to see where they've been seated…and who's at the table with them. My experience is that there is a mix of reactions (*demonstrate*). "Plenty good room" sounds fine, but I want to sit with the people I know. And in the best seats, of course.

We come by this habit honestly. With his famous saying, *cogito ergo sum* "I think, therefore I am," 17th century French philosopher René Descartes laid the groundwork for how we have come to think of "me, myself, and I." But what if there are other ways to think about personal identity that might serve as a counterweight to the rampant individualism and isolation that pervade and infect our world? Last week, we heard about loving neighbor and stranger who are as we are. Here's another variation.

One of the many gifts the late Archbishop Desmund Tutu (1931-2021) left the world is the proliferation of the Bantu concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is an ancient African spiritual understanding that humanity was created to be one with our Creator, one another, and all of creation. Roughly translated from Zulu, Ubuntu means "I am because we are." Archbishop Tutu believed that Ubuntu is the essence of being human. "I can't be a human being on my lonesome," he once said, "I wouldn't know how to speak as a human being; I wouldn't know how to think as a human being; I wouldn't know how to walk as a human being. I have to learn from other human beings how to be human. And so, Ubuntu says, 'my humanity is tied up in yours. I am only because you are.' A person is a person only through other persons." For Archbishop Tutu, this understanding of our interconnectedness was also essential to the Christian faith.[1]

[1] https://draughtingtheology.wordpress.com/2022/01/16/ubuntu-and-the-body-of-christ/#_ftn2

Most of us were formed as youngsters to view the world as full of opposites. Yes or no. Up or down. Whether we grew up with Goofus and Gallant, or the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote, or even Spy vs. Spy, we learned about the "Other," with a capital O. Naming people "Us" or "Them" seems to be the only reality we know.

On this feast of All Saints, Matthew's version of the Beatitudes and the first letter of John remind us that God names us differently. God names us beloved; God names us blessed. This is not because we deserve, or can earn, blessing. God names us beloved and blessed because of who God is and what God does for us in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The name that matters to God, the name that identifies us as God's is not Us or Them, it is child. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!* This is how God names us: beloved, blessed, children of God.

When we read Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, I think we tend to concentrate on the second half of each verse, the fulfillment half. We will be blessed because we will inherit the earth, or receive mercy. But I want you to listen for a moment to the actual list of those whom Jesus calls blessed.

The poor in spirit
Those who mourn
The meek
Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness
The merciful
The pure in heart
The peacemakers
The persecuted
The reviled.

Poverty, hunger, mourning, hatred, exclusion, loathing, and defamation. This sounds less like a list of blessings than a litany of vulnerability. Vulnerability is just, well, "*eww*." Who wants that?

In a New York Times column some years ago, David Brooks[2] posed this question – "isn't it dangerous to be vulnerable toward others where there is so much bitterness, betrayal and pain all around? My answer to that question is: Yes, it is dangerous. But it is also dangerous to be hardened and calloused over by hard times. It is also dangerous, as C.S. Lewis put it, to guard your heart so thoroughly that you make it "unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable."[3]

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The communion of saints contains super saints whose names we all know, as well as the faithful departed whom we remember today. The communion of saints also includes us. The

[2]David Brooks, *How to Stay Sane in Brutalizing Times*, New York Times, November 2, 2023.
[3] From C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

first two groups are generated without any help; we are all of us mortal. The third group, however, we can help to build. Who in your life would find this place a place of blessing? Invite them. Who used to sit near you, but you haven't seen in a while? Reach out to them. Who in your daily life doesn't know that such a place as this even exists? Invite them. Each one of us is only because all of us are.

In his 1973 book called *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, the late Frederich Buechner uses an old-fashioned Victorian custom to offer one of my favorite definitions of a saint. He wrote, "In God's holy flirtation with the world, God sometimes drops a handkerchief. Those handkerchiefs are called saints."[4]

In our rapid-fire, hook up app world, flirting seems to have gone out of fashion. We have little time for building relationships, for that delicate give-and-take of getting to know someone, to know their secrets. There is a spirit in the world that lures us toward the raw and the immediate, the quick and the dirty. That spirit seduces us with promises of fulfillment. But it has no life to offer, because it has neither mystery nor secrets. God comes to us in mystery, over time, as Buechner says, in a holy flirtation with the world.

One of the advantages of growing older is getting to know a variety of saints. As our life experiences broaden, we have the opportunity to learn more about the graceful flirtation of God through other people. And we begin to recognize that others, who are as we are, are not strangers, but saints.

You and I are all called upon to be holy handkerchiefs to those who don't know that here, there is a place for them with plenty good room. The way we will know God is to let time stop, not to be in a hurry, and to learn from the person sitting next to us.

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This place, this particular parish community, has a long history of being willing to create space, to provide plenty good room for others. This led to brave conversations about desegregation of the neighborhood and the church. There were brave conversations about welcoming queer folk. And caring for those with HIV/AIDS. And serving the actual needs of the people in our actual neighborhood, feeding bodies and souls. The need for brave conversations will keep on coming, because God keeps inviting us deeper into God's dream for us and for God's world.

With that in mind, I want to share a passage from a short story by Flannery O'Connor called *Revelation*. It's about the effect of a revelation on the self-image of a proud, middle-aged, middle class, rural, white Southern woman in the mid-20th century. Mrs. Turpin's confidence in her own salvation was founded on a vigorous sense of self-righteousness; she was always comparing herself publicly to others.

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[4] http://www.frederickbuechner.com/blog/2016/11/1/all-saints-day. Thanks also to The Very Reverend Sam Candler, Dean of Atlanta, for some of his musings on Buechner.

Here is the end of the story. It is evening, and Mrs. Turpin is standing out by the hog pen.

"…the sun slipped finally behind the tree line. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. … A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. (Ed. These were, of course, the people she detested.) There were whole companies of [poor] white [folks], clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black folks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."

"And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself …, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were *singing* on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She … gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile."

"At length she … made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah."[5]

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God is never finished with us. Any of us. *What we will be has not yet been revealed*. Whatever the work may be, God will take our actual lives, our personalities and experiences, our strengths and limitations, our accomplishments and regrets, our rewards and every single one of our scars, and use everything that is in us for the good of others, for the building up of God's kingdom.

On its good days, the Church is a place that reminds us that vulnerability is not something to shun or deny. Gathered together here at this altar, where Christ offers himself to us in his brokenness, we are reminded of God's promise to meet us precisely where we are vulnerable or needy or broken…the very places that God calls us blessed.

Each and every one of you has been named a child of God – blessed, beloved, and cherished. And each one of you has been given work to do. Salvation comes when we live most fully into the understanding that "I am because we are" and that I am only fully human when I acknowledge the full humanity of others. You are one of a countless throng, and you are one of a kind; and God desires to be made known to the world through you. *All are one in thee, for all are thine!* Handkerchiefs are everywhere, praise the Lord! Amen.

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[5] The conclusion of Flannery O'Connor's *Revelation*. The Sewanee Review, 1967. Text slightly edited.