



All Saints' Day (A)

God's Work with Us

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

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, one of the principal feasts in the life of the church. All Saints' is a day when we recall the enduring beauty of the faithful, both living and departed, and when we profess that, somehow, we are mysteriously bound together with them across time and space and context, by virtue of our common spiritual heritage.

All Saints', like any good mystery, is generative; images and similes abound in attempts to depict or describe the theological richness of the celebration. Examples are legion. For some, ruminating on All Saints' is like reflecting upon a family, filled with discrete personalities, each living into their respective lives and callings, and yet bound by shared histories, customs, and relationships. For others, All Saints' is like a patchwork quilt, fashioned from unique swatches carefully stitched together over time, yielding an exquisitely singular source of warmth and comfort and home. For still others, All Saints' is like a team, comprised of participants from diverse backgrounds who play their roles in coming together for a common purpose.

None of these images is exhaustive, to be sure. Over time and season, each (and so many others) bears fruit to be savored and appreciated; each helps us turn the prism, as it were, to glimpse a different angle of this mystery. Each ushers us more deeply into the ineffable reality of being "knit together" with the whole company of the faithful, even those who worship God on another shore and in a greater light.

All Saints' is a day saturated with meaning, in no small part, because it is a day saturated with stories, begging to be dusted off, read and reread. These stories are chock full of curious and complex characters who have been blinded or startled or warmed or provoked by God's grace—each noteworthy in their own regard. And yet, for all their diversity, these stories are sheltered under the same roof, protected by the same walls, confirmed and strengthened by the same divine love.

Over the centuries, the church has identified the lives of the saints as tangible expressions of the beatitudes, of bodies who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who pursue peace. And so, it is fitting that our gospel text on this All Saints' Day is from the first portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a section concerned with the enumeration of the beatitudes.

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most, if not *the* most, scrutinized of Jesus' teachings, likely due to it being his longest sustained discourse in the New Testament. Individuals from every background and vocation have pored over the sermon's words and phrases, searching for moral guidance, scholarly revelation, and spiritual insight for their lives of faith. Much ink has been spilled in efforts to extract every bit of nuance and significance and profundity from Jesus' words.

Yet for every volume penned, there are four besides. For every novel interpretation, there are a thousand wonderings. Though Jesus uttered these words millennia ago, they still demand our attention and prayers, to be digested steadily and slowly, as we seek the ways God would have us to go. But if you chew long enough, carry this or that statement from Jesus to what appears its logical conclusion, you are bound to find some less than appetizing parts, some bits that are tough to swallow.

One of the challenges in sitting with the list of the beatitudes—and there are many—is that they can quickly embarrass our well-intentioned pursuits of holiness. For those of us who are not sufficiently poor or persecuted or actively brokering peace, Jesus' teachings can leave us stuck between the rock of apathy and the hard place of shame – apathetic at our obvious inability to climb the moral mountains of faith, or shameful at our repeated failure for not embodying this new law the sermon prescribes.

Both of these responses can cultivate resentment: resentment toward the beatitudes themselves, even resentment toward those who have purportedly lived in accord with them. Wherever the resentment might fall, either on Jesus' teaching or on those who seem to follow it to a tee, we can be left in a frustrating place. What to do with this seemingly inaccessible morality, on which so much moral importance is placed?

This question is not lost on the church. Throughout history, numerous theologians, pastors, and spiritual writers have bumped against it (and continue to do so). Martin Luther, for instance, named the beatitudes as a measuring stick of sin, revealing just how far each has fallen short of God's glory, and how Jesus beautifully attains what us earthbound folks cannot. Luther is just one. There are others who have emphasized the almost-infinite distance between this new law and those who are to be shaped by it.

While many have lamented the beatitudes as too heavenly to be of earthly good, there are others who have seen them as Jesus' answer to the age-old question of what constitutes human fulfillment. Jesus is not after judgment, in other words. Jesus is after flourishing. The beatitudes should not be read as primarily about moral obligation, but as signposts of true happiness. In that way, they demarcate our paths as a people of faith, guiding us we go about our days.

Here are the things that make you happy, Jesus says. Take them in. Let them instill hope and enliven and direct your steps, as they have done for countless before you. Trust that the Holy Spirit will guide you on the way. This is precisely what we see over and over in the lives of the saints. We see individuals in their humanity who sought the narrow path of poverty, meekness, mercy, and purity. And we name them as

deeply fulfilled, as truly happy, opening up this well-worn, narrow way in the forest of debilitating grief or agonizing doubt or social unrest.

This is simply another way of saying that what is so extraordinary about the saints is the ways in which their ordinary lives unfolded, page by grace-filled page. The saints are those for whom God's love has seeped into the cracks and crevices of the human condition to encourage new ways of seeing themselves and the world and God. Telling the saints' stories are ways not to belittle our own piety or moral judgments, but to repeatedly remind ourselves of how God has worked with and will continue to work with generation after generation in the church for the fulfilling and elevating of humanity.

It is a deep and beautiful mystery that this day we count ourselves members of this great family of faith. It is a deep and beautiful mystery that we are invited to locate our stories among those of martyrs and confessors from millennia past and to declare boldly the same thread of love running through them all. Might we receive that as a gift this day. And might we be given grace to roll over the glories of the saints, seeing them as honest examples of God at work in our midst—and encouragement for the tough task of living this side of heaven. *Amen.*

The Rev. Dr. Andrew (“Drew”) Harmon is the Senior Associate Rector at St. James Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, La. Prior to his coming to St. James, he served as a parish priest in the Diocese of North Carolina. In addition to parish ministry, he has worked in university ministries at Clemson University, retirement community chaplaincy, and as an undergraduate theology instructor at Marquette University, where he completed his Ph.D. in Historical Theology.