

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena, Illinois
November 3, 2013-- All Saints' Sunday**

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text—Luke 6: 20-31

Those of us present in this room this morning have very different early experiences of All Saints' Day. When I was young and growing up in the small Congregational Church in my hometown, it was unheard of to observe it. Saints were those mysterious beings that my Roman Catholic friends talked about. As was true for many of you, they were given saints' names when they were baptized, and some of them wore medals around their necks. I was intrigued, and, perhaps, tiny bit envious. But as part of a tradition that came out of the Protestant Reformation, we knew little about patron saints--St. Christopher (in those days), St. Anthony, the saint of lost things; St. Jude, the saint of hopeless cases. What we did know, was that praying to saints, having them intercede with God was just wrong. We didn't need intercession—we could take our prayers directly to God! We were certain of that.

But in recent years, we have come closer together. All Saints' Day now appears on Protestant calendars. For Episcopalians, it has become common to conflate All Saints and All Souls and observe them on the closest Sunday rather than separately on November 1 & 2. The celebration has expanded to include not just the "official," canonized saints who have performed miracles or had visions. Each of these, after all, have their own individual saints' days. We have added more contemporary martyrs like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Oscar Romero to our "Lesser Feasts and Fasts." Musicians like J.S. Bach; others who have impacted history like Sojourner Truth and Susan B. Anthony. On this day, we also remember those who are known only to us--friends, family, the loved ones who have moved into the next life and await us there.

But we do not stop with only those who have died. Our scriptures tell us that those who follow Jesus, those who are part of the body of Christ are saints, too! Ordinary people like you and like me. Our liturgy today reflects the whole cloud of witnesses, doesn't it? We began with that wonderful processional hymn "For All the Saints" that gives tribute to the saints of old. Very soon we will move to our personal saints, lighting candles and naming those from this community and our own families. Then, we come to the table where we are fed and blessed and sent out singing of all the saints of God who meet "in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea..."

"And I mean to be one, too," we sing. I said that scripture includes the living as saints. So, what are the marks of sainthood? I'm sure few of us actively seek out martyrdom.

Nor, do we say, "Oh, I think today I will work on being a saint." That too often would result in self-righteousness. Those who others see as saint-like frequently don't consider how they live or act as anything special. They are simply living what they believe is in line with their faith.

So, how do we live a life of faith? Particularly in the face of the realities of our society that values wealth and success over service to others? How do we discern just what the Gospel message means and what it calls us to be and to do? We might find some help in the Gospel passage we heard this morning. Does it make you uncomfortable? It does me! For here, Jesus turns the world on its head:

Blessed are you who are poor...but woe to you who are rich. Blessed are you who are hungry now...Woe to you who are full now. Blessed are you who weep...Woe to you who laugh...Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you... Woe to you when all speak well of you...

Luke's account, known as the Sermon on the Plain, tells of Jesus and the twelve apostles coming down from the mountain after a night of prayer, meeting the multitudes on a level place. Jesus looks right into the eyes of the people and speaks about real poverty, real hunger, real weeping, and being excluded and hated. There is no poetry or parable here, just simple and direct words.

I suspect that most of us are more familiar with the Beatitudes as Matthew recorded them in the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus ascends the mountain to teach the disciples. The teachings are more elaborate...and spiritualized. For Matthew, it is not "blessed are the poor" but "blessed are the poor in spirit". A very different—seemingly softer—message.

Let us make no mistake. It is not the state of poverty, of hunger, or of alienation that are blessed here. All of these are contrary to God's purposes. It is the people who are oppressed who are blessed. For the promise is that they will be healed and filled. By the same token, it is not the state of wealth, status, and happiness that is condemned. It is those of us who are filled so full with worldly goods and rewards that we are unable to fully put our trust in God. How often, when things are going well in our lives, do we believe that we are in charge and that our lives and successes depend only on our own efforts?

Now, I do not believe that God calls every one of us to give up all of our possessions to go out and work with the poor. What I do believe is that we are called to live in the questions and the tensions, to wrestle with them rather than turning the page or switching the channel. What I do believe is that we are called to examine our lives and

question what is really important. And I believe we are called to remain open to the working of God in our lives and to the changes that we may be lead to make.

An author, Joyce Hollyday, who has dedicated her life to prophetic ministries like the Sojourners Community, was asked how she would advise those who want to know how to begin to live out the Gospel. She said:

I would start by asking people to bring new eyes to the scriptures, especially the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, the Magnificat...and all those places that talk about economic justice and living simply. I would ask people to try to read the scriptures, not asking, "how do these fit into the way my life is now?" but asking, "How can my life be shaped by this word?"....

I would also recommend that people make a concerted effort to cross some of the barriers that have been put in our way, particularly the economic and racial barriers. To really attempt to befriend people who are in a different place in their lives.

Then I would have them take seriously the kind of ministry God is calling them to. Where is it that they can live out the [Gospel message]? Where is it that they can offer to someone else the mercy of God that has been shown to them? Where is it that they can live with generosity toward those who might be different, particularly those who are being marginalized by society?

There was once a mother who walked around the nave of a church, showing her young son the beautiful stained glass windows. He asked "who are those people?" His mother told them that they are saints. He said, "I get it. Saints are people the light shines through." Saints of God, let the light shine through you!

Amen.