

November 2, 2014 - All Saints Sunday

Empty Spaces

Grace Church, Galena

One of my favorite places in the world is the space behind the high altar at Canterbury Cathedral. I say space, because that is exactly all there is. It is the place where for many years in the Middle Ages there stood the shrine of Thomas Beckett, one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in all of Western Europe. His shrine must have been an amazing thing, gold and bejeweled, the image of the saint lying there. Beckett was a much loved figure in that age. He had defied King Henry II, maintaining that the state was limited in its power over the church. A later Henry ó the VIII ó had the shrine demolished. Becket wasn't the kind of saint Henry VIII needed to be reminded of. So by order of the king, the shrine was gone.

It still is. Today, when you climb the worn steps to the cathedral's apse, there is no restoration, no artist's rendering even of the way the thing must have looked. There is only a large empty space ó and standing on the flagstones, a single candle burning. Nearby is a simple stand with a book containing the pictures and names of some saints and martyrs of our own time.

So much of what passes for the Christian life seems to be about adding things onto our already overfilled lives. We spend a lot of time and energy trying to build up programs that will get people to come to church. We get disappointed when the place isn't filled. We routinely speak about prayer or stewardship as "something" to be done, things we've somehow got to accomplish. I can't say how many times I've had conversations with

people who haven't been to church in a while who say to me in a vaguely guilty sort of way, "Well, I try to live a good Christian life." And what they seem to mean by that when the conversation goes further is that they've tried to do some good deeds here and there. Leave decent tips.

Most of us want to be good, decent members of society. Most of us want to do good work, to raise or have raised productive, happy children. We want to achieve something in life. We want to be good and to do good. And that's not a bad thing of course. By and large there are still rewards for doing the right thing. Living a decent life, playing by the rules, working hard are all ways to get along in this world. Whatever our political persuasions, it is still the fundamental message claimed by both the political right and left. Live right. Do right. However you define "right."

And for a great many people that is essentially what the Christian faith boils down to too. Do right. Fly straight. Stay on God's good side by doing all that and your life will be full of the right things. The promotions will come. The marriage will flourish. The profits will go up. The church school will prosper. The budget will balance.

It may be what the Christian faith gets reduced to, it may not be a bad thing — but it's hard to see what any of that has to do with what Jesus has to teach his friends on the hill this morning. Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the successful; blessed are the pious; blessed are those who are good enough to approach me." No. It's "Blessed are the poor;

blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who have a hunger for God.ö Jesus doesn't bless those who think they're full; he blesses those who know that they're empty.

I love how the saints define what it is to be human: they say that inside every person there is a God-shaped hole. A space. The Christian life isn't about doing more and more things to please God. In fact, the news from Jesus is that there isn't anything we can do to make God happy with us ó God already delights in us. We don't come to church, put in our Sunday appearance, so that God won't zap us. We don't baptize new Christians so that God will love them. God already loves them. God already loves you ó whether you come to church or not. Even if you don't fill out that pledge card! We celebrate baptisms and we renew our baptismal vows to wash away the disguise the world wants us to wear. Namely, that it's who you know, what you know, how much you can produce and consume, how powerful you are ó that those are the things that make you valuable. That it's how much you can stuff into your life that adds up to your total worth. And that is a lie.

Too many of us spend our time building our lives into more and more elaborate structures that turn out to be tombs. I know that I have spent a great deal of my life trying to be good enough, smart enough, elegant enough, productive enough, and on and on. For what? I suppose to stave off the uncomfortable suspicion that no amount of my effort is ever going to be enough. The truth is that I cannot save myself. I cannot create for myself any structure that will provide ultimate security. Ultimate security isn't living.

The Christian faith is, however, all about living. It is about real life lived in a freedom and peace, with a risk and a flair that we can scarcely imagine most of the time. It is not about constructing busy, elaborate tombs or religious bunkers. It is rather about the essential emptiness at the heart of the cathedral of our lives. That God shaped hole. In such a place, in such a space, there is room enough to live, there's room to dance if you want to. There, in that empty place at the heart of each of us, burns the light of Christ.

This is dangerous stuff. No wonder we'd rather build monuments. On the stand at Canterbury is a book of *martyrs* after all. The world we live in isn't going to understand emptiness as our highest value. Its creed is "more is more." We sign newly baptized persons with a cross, remember. We ask parents and godparents to renounce those systems and forces in the world that exist to build and polish and prop up the tombs. We ask them to turn their backs on the lies that with only enough "whatever" we can save ourselves. We ask them to lead their children to the light of Christ and to put all their trust, all their hope in him. And we remind them, and we remind ourselves, that if we are prepared to take Christ seriously, the world will not understand and we may have to forgo some of its rewards.

But, oh my friends, that is the way to a life worth having.

So, where are you empty? Are you afraid? Do you worry? Are you mourning something? A death, the loss of something in your life that was precious? Do you feel alone? Are you struggling with a moral dilemma? Are there wounds in your life waiting

to be healed? Do you have the feeling that there must be more to life than all the stuff you're surrounded with? Do you ever, even for a moment, wonder if anyone really knows who you are? And if they knew would they still love you? Do you know the empty place in your life? Then blessed are you. Blessed are they who know their need for God. For they will be satisfied. God will fill them. God can fill you and me. Let him.