

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/7/2010, All Saints Sunday
Luke 6:20-31
The Church as a Noble Community

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin this All Saints sermon by borrowing some recent words from my wife, Carol. She was at the podium at the end of the reception last Sunday following the Reformation liturgy at The Wartburg Chapel. Other folks had spoken. Now it was her time to speak. She began by recalling an interfaith discussion on National Public Radio about happiness. A rabbi had said the perfect thing:

Happiness is pausing to let the blessings catch up.

There is a good distinction here. It is one thing to be blessed. It is something else to *feel* the blessings, to pause long enough to let them catch up to you, to let your heart acknowledge your blessings and to be glad for them. Life is busy. We become preoccupied with many things. We sometimes strain ahead toward our goals with such focus, even with such impatience, that we lose sight of the many blessings that have uplifted us and brought us where we are. We become forgetful of the goodness of the Lord so far.

All Saints Sunday invites us to pause and to let the blessing of the Church and the saints catch up to us. There are two points here: It is a blessing to be part of the Church, for it is a most remarkable and noble society. And second, the Church is made up of people -- lots of them! The community of the Church is vast, with people as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. They are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, our mothers and fathers, our grandmothers and grandfathers in the Lord, and they are all saints. They are each one purchased with the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and called to be, as it were, flowers and fountains on earth, points of beauty that refresh the world, giving it some help and some hope.

So, let's consider these two blessings: the Church as a sacred and noble community, and the Church as a great multitude of *saints* on earth.

First, the Church is a noble society. Listen again to the revolutionary preaching of Jesus in today's Gospel story. This reading is from St. Luke. We hear similar words from the Sermon on the Mount in St. Matthew. Jesus is talking about a society which practices kindness even toward enemies:

²⁷,"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from

anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:27-31, NRSV)

Is this not why you wanted to join the Church in the first place? Is this not why you feel drawn to the Church now. I mean, go back to the beginning of your faith, to when you were first deciding to be baptized or to affirm your baptism in Holy Confirmation. Did you join the church because you hoped to become wealthy? No, you joined because you hoped to become good.

You had heard the preaching about Jesus. You had heard that not only did he call his disciples to this miracle on earth - that we should love our enemies - but he himself illustrated such love to the highest degree:

But these, the objects of His beneficence, these said, “He hath a devil,” (John x. 20.) and “blasphemeth,” (John x. 36.) and “is mad,” and is a “deceiver,” (John vii. 12, and Matt. xxvii. 63.) Did he therefore cast them away? No, in no wise, but when He heard these sayings, He even yet more signally bestowed His benefits upon them, and went straightway to them that were about to crucify Him, to the intent that He might but only save them. And after He was crucified, what were His words? “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke xxiii. 34.) Both cruelly treated before this, and cruelly treated after this, even to the very latest breath, for them He did everything, in their behalf He prayed. Yea, and after the Cross itself, what did He not do for their sakes? Did He not send Apostles? Did He not work miracles? Did He not shake the whole world?¹

This Jesus says to those who would be his disciples that they are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. The presence of the Church should make a difference to our world, a strong difference! For we follow a Lord who asks us to follow his pattern of steadfast love. It is a strange manner of life, to love even our enemies, and to bless those who curse us. But it is a manner of life capable of stunning the world and opening up new possibilities for our neighbors. For any one of us, to join the Church is to join a noble society aimed at improving things for everyone.

To practice the pattern of Christ’s life, even to doing good to them that hate you, is the truly *relevant* gift you can give to your neighbors. What any of us needs is this strange preaching of Jesus and his strange manner of life. That is how a human life gets back on track. To bid our neighbors into such extraordinary love that we love even our enemies is to invite them into a manner of life some part of

¹ St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, on Ephesians 3:8-21.

their heart will recognize as being the true way of life for them. It is to invite them back toward innocence and goodness.

Do not fear that loving your enemy amounts to being a pushover. No, if your enemy is unjust, it is no love for your enemy to let that one linger in injustice. So, loving your enemy can involve exhortation toward repentance and amendment of life. Still, it does mean that it should be our earnest intention to work for the good of our neighbor, even our enemy, and to refrain from cursing that one. Do not curse your enemy, but pray for your enemy. If your enemy marches headlong in opposition to you, at least you can do this: curse not, but pray for that one.

If Jesus be not risen, such kindness toward enemies would make no sense. It would not seem prudent. But if Jesus is risen, then all kind of good things become possible and worth striving for. Jesus *is* risen! Therefore you have a champion at your side as you venture out on loving even your enemy.

Enough for now for this first theme: To be a member of the Church is to be a member of a very noble society. It is a remarkable community, the Church, for in it dwell folks who love their enemies.

Now, let me turn to my second theme: To join the Church is to take our place at the side of many, many other people. It is to take our place within the saints of every time and of every place. All Saints Sunday invites us to take stock of the fact that we are not solitary Christians in this world, but have many brothers and sisters in the Lord.

All Saints Sunday is the ecumenical festival of the Church. The sad divisions that fragment Christ's church on earth into various denominations does not apply at the level of All Saints Sunday. As Vatican II put it, all the baptized are brothers and sisters in the Lord. And so, on this Sunday, we can claim St. Francis as our brother and St. Patrick as our brother and Mother Theresa of Calcutta as our sister in the Lord. It matters not whether they are Lutherans. They are Christians and we can be proud of them as members of that same noble community in which we ourselves claim membership.

It has been a while since I had a seminary field ed student or intern to supervise, but back when I did, I tried to hold up a certain image for them. I urged them to understand that when they walk these couple steps up into the pulpit, they are taking their place among a great and holy assembly of preachers. I ask them to understand that St. Augustine is listening to their sermon, and I urge them to preach in such a way that that saint of old can hear the sermon, nod his head, and say to himself, "Yes, that is what we preach! That is the old, old story of Jesus and of his love!" To be part of the Church, I say, is to take our place within a holy multitude of saints.

As I mention in our most recent newsletter, the approach of my twenty-fifth anniversary of ordination has put me in a reminiscing mood. I find myself thinking of all the saints who have influence me. I begin by recalling my parents, Paul and Rachel. They both died young of cancer, too young. But while they lived, they brought me to our Lord Jesus, they taught me the faith of the Church, and they illustrated lives of faithfulness.

I am mindful of my pastors over the years, including Pastor Raymond Shaheen, of blessed memory, as well as Pastor Raymond Schulze and Pastor David Lotz. I have been able to stand at the side of saints and have learned from them.

Likewise, I have been blessed by theologians, including Robert Jenson who will preach for us next Sunday. Indeed, I have been blessed by the friendship of an extraordinary number of theologians of the Church.

And I have been encouraged in faith by you people of Immanuel. Do not underestimate your influence in the life of the pastor. Pastors both influence and are influenced by their people. That is why it is such a blessing for me to be part of this congregation. You might think yourself to be a quiet, even a shy member of the church. But be pleased to know that I notice you, and other people notice you, and in noticing you, we are made better.

And broadening the perspective, all of the believers in Christ are united by a unity that not even death can sunder, for those who have died have drawn nearer to the same Christ who comes near to us now in the Blessed Sacrament. With the eyes of faith, then, imagine this church to be filled with all the saints, including St. Peter and St. Paul, St. Francis and St. Dominic, Blessed Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Picture your grandparents here and others who influenced you.

To be part of the Church is to both receive and to give. We have received much from the saints, including the careful transmission to us of the Bible, the dogmas of the church, and the liturgy.

And as long as we live, it is our turn to pass on the faith of the church to others. There will always be people in this world who when they hear of Jesus and his call to love even our enemies, will find that preaching to strike a chord in their hearts, and they will be willing to become Christ's man, woman, boy, or girl.

There are already many saints in Christ's Church, but Christ longs for more. Let us so live, in word and deed, that we help draw them to him, to whom belongs the glory, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.