

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Festival of All Saints

November 7, 2004

Texts: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1:11-23; and Luke 6:20-31

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THE MORAL VALUE OF COMPASSION

For sound, practical reasons, the Serenity Prayer was adapted for its use in recovery from alcohol or drug addiction. But today, I begin my post-election, All Saints Day sermon with its original version by Lutheran theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. *"God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other."*

I would suggest that the focus of All Saints Day puts us squarely in the territory of the first petition of this prayer, *"God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed."* On this day of the church year we name ourselves as mortal. We strive to face our mortality by honoring our departed loved ones and preparing for the eventuality of our deaths while choosing life. We cannot change our mortal condition. We come from the soil of the earth and we will return to its dust. One day we will be here and the next day we will be gone. We are a breath on a chilly day momentarily suspended in air until it dissipates into the wider mystery. Now is the time to do our business, to make our contributions, to smell the roses, to reconcile with those alienated from us, to be joyful and alive. End of life concerns may include wills, trusts, medical directives, plans for the Memorial Terrace, a legacy of financial support for worthy causes, and a journal or record of personal reflection. We can simultaneously prepare for our eventual deaths even as we embrace life more fully.

In the category of praying for the *"courage to change the things which should be changed"* I would put much of the fall-out of our national election. The conservative tide that threatens to limit and revoke civil rights, exploit the environment, and promote military might regardless of being ethically right is not a fated tsunami, destined to wipe out our hopes for a just, sustainable and peaceful future. Our biblical texts for today help us with the job of distinguishing the *"won't change"* from the *"should be changed"* stuff of life.

The prophet Daniel has a dream that gives him a headache. When he asks for an interpretation, he learns that the dragon-like figures coming out of the sea are political empires – namely, Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece under the leadership of Alexander the Great. Their power is great and terrible for a time. *"But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the realm of God and possess it forever and ever."* This perspective commends us to ongoing, eternal authority and not the brute strength of the moment. Daniel will go on to describe one sea dragon in particular that puts the horror of the others to shame. This monster was the ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who defiles the temple in Jerusalem by erecting his own shrine over the existing altar.

Blending political, military and religious authority is tempting and often profitable in the short run. The American flag and the Christian cross have largely been co-opted by the

religious right to represent their narrow view of these more universal symbols. When a teenager for John Kerry was canvassing a neighborhood, she approached a house with an America flag out front. She rang their bell and began to engage them regarding the election. The man snapped, "Why are you bothering us? We're Republicans. Didn't you see our flag?" When crosses become signs of racial intimidation and gay-bashing, it is time to take back the sign of the cross for the world's redemption and liberation. In the end, Democrat, Republican, Independent and Green Party bow to the supremacy of God's authority and power. It is a humbling reminder. May it also be an empowering reminder to act now, claiming the full meaning of the symbols that sustain our convictions.

Today's gospel lands us in the heart of the debate over "moral values." *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the dominion of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."* The direct audience is those who are suffering in this moment. The caring attention of Jesus in the moment automatically reverses their condition of being devalued and ignored. They are now blessed. We feel the extent of the early church's oppression in the detailed account of social exclusion. *"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Humanity."* (The actual phrase was "cast out your name as evil".) *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."* The parallel "woes" are recounted, warning that the self-satisfaction of creature comforts lives only in the moment at the peril of our spiritual welfare.

The passage continues with advise for how to handle ourselves when others hate us or abuse us or take advantage of us. We are to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, turn the other cheek to the one who slaps us, give voluntarily when things are taken away, and give to any that ask. We are to do to others as we would have them do to us.

We must be careful that we do not elevate the status of victim. The passage presses the point to its limit. What do you do when others devalue you? You do not cooperate and assist the abuse. You unmask the face of the oppressor. You claim your own authority when confronted with brute force. It is the paradoxical path of non-violent resistance that does not fuel hatred with more hatred, nor does it reward hatred with fear and self-abasement. Rather love, non-judgmental acceptance and non-compliance neutralize the source of hate.

Many of us felt devalued, rejected and blamed in this week's election. The moral values of opposing the military disaster in Iraq, decrying the exploitation of our planet, and standing for economic justice were given little moral weight in the post-election analysis. Those who voted to ban same-sex marriages, curtail abortion and protect private financing for public programs were applauded as upholding traditional moral values. We are already scrambling on this slippery slope, witnessing the justification of questionable decisions and harmful actions based on moral fervor rather than reliable information, broad-based alliances, and committed diplomacy.

In his book, [Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time](#), Lutheran theologian Marcus Borg writes about the ongoing conflict in Jesus' ministry between the ethic and politics of the purity code -

“Be holy as God is holy.” – and the ethic and politics of compassion – “Be compassionate as God is compassionate.” “The effect of the purity system was to create a world with sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.” Jesus shattered these rigid social boundaries by welcoming people across social lines, healing outcasts by touching them and practicing open and inclusive table fellowship. The politics of compassion are embodied in vibrant, diverse community – not carefully regulated purity. I think we saw this at work in the election as well. Marriage of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples was seen as contaminating family values and possibly even spoiling the entire national election.

“Rejoice and leap for joy,” says St. Luke. We must be doing something right to stir up the dragon of the status quo. The false prophets told people just what they wanted to hear and got in little trouble. But they didn’t help liberate the people or lead people closer to God’s intentions.

Unfortunately, the examples go on. On Friday, October 29, the Bishop and the Synod Council of the Pacifica Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) passed a resolution that began with praise for the wonderful work of Central City Lutheran Mission of San Bernadino in its outreach to a poor and racially diverse community. It even praised the exceptional work of Jenny Mason. (You may recall that Pr. Jenny Mason was called to this unique and innovative mission congregation that also supports a social service agency that provides help with medical, housing and addiction support needs. Funds for CCLM were withheld and conflicts have been brewing since Pr. Mason, who is an out lesbian on the ECP roster, was installed in April. A special appeal was made through LLGM. St. Francis contributed money from our benevolence funds.) The upshot is that on October 29 Central City Lutheran Mission was removed from the roster of the ELCA as a congregation in development. That same day, the call to its lead pastor, Pr. David Kalke, was terminated. Currently CCLM continues as a social ministry organization within the ELCA. Ironically, Pr. Kalke was encouraged to apply to the Synod Council for a call to CCLM, the social ministry organization, as their CEO. They can do all of the work but they cannot be a congregation with Pr. Mason on staff. Since the trials of St. Francis and First United, the ELCA constitution was amended so that synods could expel mission congregations without needing to convene a national disciplinary process. Of course, there is no appeal process.

CCLM is determined to continue as a Word and Sacrament congregation. LLGM’s response team is working with CCLM closely to craft a coordinated response that meets their complex needs. The ECP, St. Francis and other congregations are extending support.

Pr. Kalke offers us these words of encouragement. “I concluded my presentation to the Synod Council today by discussing Luther’s seven marks of the church, which I thought would be appropriate reading material for this Reformation Day weekend. The seventh mark is the ‘possession of the holy sacred cross.’ Luther goes on to say that the church by its giving testimony to Christ’s suffering will itself experience suffering and persecution as a consequence for the preaching of the cross. This is not a self-fulfilling prophecy but a theological statement about suffering which comes as a result of a commitment to a higher set

of life-giving and life-preserving values. In my opinion, Central City Lutheran Mission has been the church and does have in its essence of practice the seven marks Luther spoke about. Suffering and persecution is not something new to the church. Nor should it be feared or avoided. While it is not sought after, it comes quietly as a consequence for being a faithful people in difficult times.”

May we continue to be among those faithful people in difficult times who may get derided or rejected for the sake of integrity, inclusive hospitality and the moral value of recognizing and advocating for the dignity and worth of all. As William Sloane Coffin says, we will live at “loving odds” with the church and society until justice-love becomes a reality for all. We will not stoop to the objectification and devaluation of those who oppose us or even those who cast out our names as evil. But neither will we silently collaborate with oppression. Our eyes are open. We know the amazing grace of living and working together in diversity and dignity. We cannot give up. We must be among those who lead the way to integrating the moral values of social justice with the moral values of personal responsibility in ways that authenticate rather than regulate people. The politics of compassion – not the politics of purity – must lead our vision and our efforts.

Our final scripture reading from Ephesians reminds us that we have a great spiritual inheritance, sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit and founded in Christ’s resurrection from the dead. *“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ ... may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for us who believe.”* May this inheritance of hope and power give you comfort, strength and joy on this All Saints Day as you claim your place in the eternal kin-dom of God’s compassion. *“God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.”* † Amen.

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