

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

All Saints' Sunday/November 5, 2017

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

Today is All Saints' Sunday and I am going to give you a double-feature or a double-header depending on what bit of entertainment you like to watch. This morning I am going to talk about what it means to be a child of God, or a saint. You know sometimes, with a bit of a smile and a great deal of truth, I address us as saints of Saint Paul's. What does that mean? Tonight, at our Requiem Eucharist I will talk about what it is to live under the power of the Holy Spirit. The imagery that is guiding these sermons comes from a passage in Wendell Berry's novel, *Remembering*. The Holy Spirit is like (he writes): "swift water over stones, rubbing them together, grinding off their edges, making them fit together, fit to be together, in the only way that fragments can be rejoined." This morning I am going to talk about the "living stones" fit to be together, as Peter talks of saints and followers of God. Tonight, I will address the Holy Spirit as swift water that makes us fit together.

John in the passage we heard from the Book of Revelation asks, "Who are these... and where have they come from?" This is the theme of this morning's sermon. They are those, as we prayed in our collect this morning, who have been knit together in one communion and fellowship. They have been made so that they fit together. They are fit to be together in the mystical body of Christ, in the only way that fragments can be rejoined.

Martin Luther, who rolls his eyes every time Joseph jokes about purgatory points, describes this mystical communion each time we pray. He wrote: "Never think that you are kneeling or standing alone, rather think that the whole Christendom, all devout Christians, are standing there beside you and you are standing among them in a common, united petition which God cannot disdain." Luther, of course, famously wrote his 95 theses 500 years ago

this week to protest indulgences that would speed whoever you donated money for through purgatory. Luther said, “Nonsense, whatever happens, it is all about God’s grace.”

Jesus does not promise that being part of this communion of saints is easy. Any new exodus out of being outsized with sharp edges and coercive will entail a journey through wilderness. There are no indulgences to speed our way. There will be conflicting loyalties we will need to sort out, an ordeal we will need to pass through. There are those who will be ready to take advantage of meekness. In another place Jesus said, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Even there, however, set upon by others, we may rest quietly and simply in the love of God. There is no expectation except of what grace can give. Receive it meekly and with great hope.

So, we should think first about God’s grace. To be a child of God is no achievement of our own. Each one knows their need of God, and sometimes that knowledge is hard-bought. The poor in spirit, the saints are all the children of God. They are that by love not by right. There is no self-aggrandizement. You can’t be a saint and put yourself over another. There is no grandiosity. You can’t be in the communion of saints and find yourself under the thumb of another saint. We are made to fit together, to be fit to be together. Outside the communion of saints, that is, in an often-hostile world, some get out-sized. They drive their children, they exploit the planet, they use social media to bully others, and on a global scale try to overpower countries. I think we need to find a way to become small. “Let the little children come to me...” Jesus said. Be a child of God.

Children of God do not console their wounds by injuring others (well, sometimes we do, but it’s not our best selves); rather they mourn and are comforted. Love embraces the tears and dries them when they are ready to be dried. We inherit the earth not by being the biggest s.o.b. on the planet but surprisingly through meekness. The saints form a community of mutual mercy. Or as Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer, mutual forgiveness: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Forgiveness is part of the glue that holds the communion of saints together. Purity is not imposed by

outside force and alignment with some litmus test. Rather purity has to do with the heart.

A father tells of his eighteen-month-old daughter. She interrupts him to bring him a plastic doughnut from her kitchen play set. He looks at his daughter. She looks up at him waiting for a response. The father takes the plastic doughnut to his mouth and exclaims with pleasure. "This tastes so good! Yumm. Thank you." Then to hear him tell it, "Something beautiful happened. Her big brown eyes widened, and her lips pushed a giant smile against her puffy cheeks. She stood up on her toes, shrugged her shoulders up to her ears, and let out a high-pitched squeal of joy." This too is to be a child of God. Our gifts to God are like plastic donuts. God doesn't need our gifts or our money. But when we give of something that really matters to us it gets God's attention! I think like the father in the story, God likes his children to interrupt and offer gifts from a pure heart.

Where does it all get us, this sainthood? Jesus says to them belongs the kingdom of heaven. If the origin of sainthood is God's love so is its destiny. We are swept along in God's current that is the mending of creation. Salvation is the triumphant passage through persecution. Again, not because of anything we are owed, or deserve, or can achieve on our own. But only through Christ's action of love, the faith by which we hold firm, and God's promise in which we hope. This destiny toward which we live and move is mysterious. Right now, we know only in part. "When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end" (1Cor. 13: 10). Then we will be so immersed in God's presence that we will see God in Christ as he is. That is every mystic's dream. It is the destiny of every saint, that is, you and me. Then the heavenly liturgy of praise will take place right here on earth. Perhaps even now we can hear the echoes of the angels' song and that of the elders and four living creatures: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." May that song one day surround us all!

This ends the first portion of today's double feature. We have heard of the saints whom the Spirit makes fit to be together and what that means. Tune in at 5 to hear of the Spirit that like swift water rubs and grinds until we are fit to be called saints.

Amen.