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Good Morning Saints!

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
All Saints' Sunday November 7, 2010

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The Church in the Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

During my first year in seminary, I had a preaching class that met at eight o'clock in the morning. It was one of those classes when I would wake up around seven forty-five, throw on whatever clothes were close at hand, and stumble into class still half-asleep. And every morning, our preaching instructor would arrive, impeccably dressed, wide-awake and cheerful, and he would say, "Good Morning Saints."

The first few times he would greet us with this cheerful "Good Morning Saints," I would look around and wonder who or what on earth he was talking about. At that time in the morning, before I even had a cup of coffee, I was feeling anything but saintly. If he had said, "Good morning, you crabby, over-worked, tragically misunderstood first-year students," that I would have understood. Even if he had said, "Good morning you bunch of whiny first-year students," I wouldn't have liked it, but I would have had to admit, he had a pretty good point. But "Good Morning Saints." It didn't make any sense. I didn't feel like a saint. I felt like . . . well . . . not to whine . . . but an over-worked, misunderstood, first-year student.

Eventually, I began to catch on. He wasn't calling us saints because he thought we were super, holy people. Surprise, surprise. Rather, he was making a point about the common calling we all shared in Christ. He was reminding us that each of us was called in our baptisms to share the light of Christ in this world: Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. He was reminding us that the church was, in the words of William Willimon, in the business of producing saints, those "ordinary people who have been called by God to live sanctified lives, lives that are so caught up in the plans of God that they are called saints." He was recalling the way St. Paul used to address his letters to all the saints gathered in the church at a particular place, by which he meant all those who were baptized and gathered in that place. And this morning, in this place, in this gathering of St. Anne's Church, we are baptizing some new saints, people through whom the light of God shines, through whom, we pray, the world will know the love of God.

So, on this All Saints' Sunday, the first thing I want to say is *Good Morning Saints!*

Now, I expect many of us may be somewhat surprised to hear that All Saints' Day is also about us, because it is often hard to imagine the word "saint" attached to our names. I know I was. We know all too well our own shortcomings. We know how often we have failed to show love to our neighbors, how often we could have let God's light shine through us, but drew down the shade instead. But we are saints, not because of ourselves, but in spite of ourselves. We are saints because of what God has done for us, and continues to do for us. We are saints because God has work for us to do in this world, and, believe it or not, we are the means through whom God wants that work to get done. As many of you know, Episcopalians are *incarnational* people, and one thing that means is that through this earthen vessel, through these earthen vessels, cracked and chipped as we may be, God chooses to work in the world. Yes, cracked vessels are leaky sometimes. But remember, through those same cracks, God's light can also shine. Isn't it so often the case, that when these hearts of stone are broken open, then the love of God can pour into our hearts of flesh. And isn't it from our broken and vulnerable hearts that we can finally show God's love to the world. Saints aren't invulnerable, super-spiritual, macho types. They are the people whose loving and vulnerable hearts point us to the loving and vulnerable heart of God.

Perhaps that's why Jesus says in our Gospel lesson for today, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Blessed are all you ordinary saints, in your poverty, in your emptiness, in your compassion, and in your hunger. Blessed are all you loving and vulnerable saints.

But, for purposes that are known only to God, God chooses to do extraordinary things through these ordinary, earthen vessels, through our own weakness and vulnerability. Because in the same Sermon, Jesus also says, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Ordinary people called to do extraordinary things like love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who abuse us. These are extraordinary things. They also happen to be things desperately needed in our world today.

Of all the extraordinary things mentioned in our Gospel lesson for today, I'm going to focus on only one: love your enemies. In our forums last month we had a couple of sessions on forgiveness and I was struck by how all of us seem to be dealing with issues of forgiveness and reconciliation at some level. The wisdom of all the saints gathered for those conversations shined through and inspired me.

Now there are a lot of extraordinary stories of people loving their enemies and forgiving those who trespass against them. Stories like Associated Press Reporter Terry Anderson forgiving the men who kidnapped him and held him in brutal captivity for nearly seven years, and stories like the Amish Community in Nickel Mine, Pennsylvania who not only sent words of forgiveness to the family of the man who killed five of their children before taking his own life, but who also attended his funeral and set up a fund to provide for the welfare of the killer's widow and children. These are true stories, inspiring stories, stories about amazing people through whom the light of God's reconciling love shines.

But what about us more ordinary saints? What about us who may not be called to such heroic acts of love and forgiveness? What about those of us who wake up crabby, say unkind things, who have vulnerable hearts, who get hurt, and who have a hard time giving up their anger and resentment?

Anne Lamott, in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, tells a story about how she learned to forgive.¹ She writes, “I went around saying for a long time that I am not one of those Christians who is heavily into forgiveness – that I am one of the other kind. But even though it was funny, and actually true, it started to be too painful to stay this way. They say we are not punished for the sin but by the sin, and I began to feel punished by my unwillingness to forgive. By the time I decided to become one of the ones who is heavily into forgiveness, it was like trying to become a marathon runner in middle age; everything inside me either recoiled, as from a hot flame, or laughed a little too hysterically.”

Lamott goes on to tell a story about an ordinary, everyday enemy – the parent of one of her son’s friends whom she calls “Enemy Light,” a person she felt was constantly demeaning her because she wasn’t the right kind of mother. Lamott speaks of her own long, slow movement in their testy relationship from anger and a desire for revenge against this woman to an acknowledgement of their common humanity, and an admission that some of her evil thoughts toward this woman were actually projections of her own shortcomings.

It was while sitting in this woman’s dining room, sharing tea with her, that Lamott says the veil finally lifted, and she finally released and let go much of the anger and resentment that she had been holding inside. She describes the lifting of the veil this way, “I felt so happy there in her living room that I got drunk on her tea. I read once in some magazine that in Czechoslovakia, they say an echo in the woods always returns your own call, and so I started speaking sweetly to everyone – to the mother, to the boys. And my sweet voice started getting all over me, like sunlight, like the smell of the Danish baking in her oven, two of which my former enemy put on a paper plate and covered with tin foil for me and [my son] to take home.”

Is it possible to love our enemies? Do we have to be saints in order to forgive those who trespass against us?

I believe folks like Terry Anderson and the Amish community in Nickel Mine are saints. I also believe that Anne Lamott is a saint, as I believe each and every one of us gathered here today are saints. Everyday, ordinary saints gathered together by God’s love. All of us have been called by God. All of us have been blessed by God. All of our ordinary and extraordinary lives have been caught up in the loving purposes of God, who sends us out into the world to love and serve our neighbors, to seek and serve Christ in all people, even when those people happen to be our enemy.

So, *Good Morning Saints!*

To all you, ordinary, extraordinary, beautiful, beloved saints of God, I want to wish you a Happy All Saints’ Day!

May your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

¹ Story taken from Anne LaMotte, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Anchor Books, 2000).