

## **“All Saints Sermon”**

**Sunday, November 7, 2010: Luke 6:20-31**

**The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector**

Jean Paul Sartre was a French existentialist philosopher. Existentialism believes that the focus of philosophical thought is to deal with the conditions of existence of the individual person and his or her emotions, actions, responsibilities, and thoughts. One of Sartre's significant beliefs was this: The existentialist conceptions of freedom and value arise from their view of the individual. *Since we are all ultimately alone, isolated islands of subjectivity in an objective world*, we have absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of our value can only be internal.

While existentialism is not in itself hostile to religion – theologians Paul Tillich and Karl Barth can be thought of as Christian existentialists – one can quickly discern in Sartre's statement a belief in direct opposition to Christian doctrine. If we are, as Sartre postulates, “all ultimately alone, isolated islands of subjectivity in an objective world” than the creedal statement, “I believe in the communion of saints” is rendered false. Clearly one cannot be “ultimately alone” while professing to be a part of the communion of saints. (Although I will observe that seeing people at Starbucks totally mesmerized by their laptops, I-pads and Blackberries, surrounded by other equally captivated people, allows me to understand that becoming isolated islands in the midst of a sea of humanity is a clear and present danger to our humanity.)

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, a day that celebrates the communion of saints. Christian theology believes that the communion of saints is the spiritual union of all members of the Christian Church living and the dead, those on earth, as well as those people who have died and gone back to God. They are all part of a single "mystical body", with Christ as the head, in which each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all.

The Sistine Chapel wonderfully depicts an image of the communion of saints. Look up at the ceiling and you behold God creating Adam in a cloud of heavenly glory. Every inch of wall space is filled with images of Father, Son, Spirit, Mary, angels, prophets and saints, as well as the citizens of earth and purgatory. Hell's residents are there, too, but they are not part of this communion. But as we Episcopalians do not believe in purgatory and I have serious doubts about the existence of an eternal place of torment called Hell, for the sake of this sermon let's just say that all the children of God are part of the communion of saints.

Michelangelo's great work of art in the Sistine Chapel reminds us that as members of the communion of saints we are not alone. Christians never are ultimately alone, never are isolated islands. We are surrounded and sustained by an infinite sea of saints who are the mystical body of Christ. This is a crucial component of Christian theology. No matter the difficult circumstances and obstacles life throws our way. Regardless of how dismal, bleak, frightening or imperiled the situations we face, we are not alone.

This is what Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes. He is not offering some saccharine, touchy-feely, pat on the arm to those who are beset by woes just to make them feel better. Jesus is conveying a core truth of our Christian identity. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”

And then of course that seemingly preposterous statement: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” How in God's name are we to do that, we wonder, and frankly *why should we do that?*

These words all sound like religious mumbo-jumbo, pie in the sky idealism if you understand yourself to be ultimately alone or an isolated island. How can anyone be blessed by those hard circumstances Jesus describes? When they occur to us isn't it wiser to retreat into ourselves, build a big wall to protect us from those who hate us and want to render us harm?

But when you identify yourself as a part of a communion of saints -- a community of faithful companions whose numbers are as numerous as the stars in the sky -- the Beatitudes come alive with vibrant truth!

*Of course* we will be blessed when hunger, sorrow and loss, hatred and exclusion come our way. We are not alone. The blessings in those situations appear to us in the presence of the communion of saints; the living one's who care for and comfort us and the dead one's whose memory and witness sustains and strengthens us. Through these saints we are fed and made whole, we are made to laugh and we rejoice. In the presence of the saints we receive a foretaste of God's reign. That is blessing indeed!

And of course as communal members of the communion of saints we are called to love those who want to do us harm and despise us. This is especially true when, like me, you doubt the existence of a permanent, eternal Hell. If there is no Hell than the folks who don't like me, who desire to harm me, ultimately need to go somewhere! Believing this leads me to the understanding that those folks who hate and despise me are redeemable – as much as that may annoy me - because they are equally a part of the communion of saints, just as I am. And in the odd ways God works in the world (and in my loving them), God sets up the endless possibility of healing, redemption and wholeness for all of us.

The Beatitudes is what the Church is meant to be all about: striving to faithfully live our role as members of the communion of saints.

On our good days we do that quite well at Christ Church. We feed the physically hungry with food and the spiritually hungry with worship, study and the word of God. We accompany the ill, distressed and the frightened; sometimes literally to hospitals, doctors appointments or surgical waiting rooms. And sometimes we accompany them in prayer, conversation, drinking coffee, emails, phone calls and Facebook posts. And when people are hated and reviled in the world we at Christ Church embrace them and remind them of God's radical and abundant love for all God's children.

I can tell you of any number of people in this congregation who in moments of isolation and loneliness were surrounded and embraced by the saints here. Those are Beatitude moments of immeasurable grace.

We are all numbered among the saints through God's action. Through Jesus' ministry, we have been knit in one communion, one fellowship, one Body of Christ. When we ask for grace to follow Jesus in how we live we aren't asking for something that is foreign to who we are; we are asking to grow more deeply and experience more fully the identity we have in Christ. In other words, "For all the saints ..." is for us.

So when we hear the audacious vision of the Beatitudes, we are not afraid. Admittedly living a life focused on turning pain and sorrow into blessing can be costly in our world, we will be reviled at times, but it's not all up to us. We are part of one communion of saints with all the heroes of the faith, with our loved ones who have gone before us, and with all the saints sitting next to you in the pews and living throughout the world today.

That's why we can pray with confidence:

*Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.*

We are not alone.

Amen.