

“The Politics of Blessing”
All Saints Day, November 6, 2022
Scripture: Luke 6:20-31

Over the years I’ve come to appreciate our celebration of All Saints’ Day more and more. Taking time to remember those women and men we have loved and lost over the last year, and speaking their names as we light a candle in their honor, might seem like a simple gesture, but it gives us all a chance to wrap ourselves in the great cloud of witnesses who have shaped each one of us. It reminds us we are not alone in this journey of life, none of us is self-made, we are all the products of the influences around us, for both good and ill. I’m not trying to be cute in saying that. The reality is none of our lives is unambiguously positive. We all have been exposed to light and darkness. Just as those whose memories we honor today were. The question for us, as it was for them, is what patterns from the tapestry of influence that has shaped us do we want to carry forward and what do we need to overcome?

That’s not meant in any way as a criticism of our loved ones. Each of them did the best they could with what they were given. Many of them overcame deep darkness and shed immense light for those around them. We call them saints because for us these people are holy; the memories of them we carry are sacred.

I think in part the value we place on our memories of loved ones lost is related to the impact they may have had on the world around them. Not many of us are able to change the world in a global sense by the way we live. But we do have an influence on the world in small ways. Each of us represents a pebble thrown into a pond causing ripples that extend beyond ourselves in ways we can’t predict and often never know. Many of the people on our list of names today affected people they never met through some gesture or word that led to actions by others beyond their intentions. It happens to us every day. Every one of us affects the world in ways we never see but are real nonetheless.

This is why All Saints’ Day is an important moment in our worship life. It’s a chance for us to stop and reflect not just on the impact others have had on the world, but on the impact each of us has on the world every day.

It seems to me, this is what lies at the heart of Jesus’ message to his disciples in this reading from Luke’s gospel. He begins by describing a world turned upside-down. He confers blessing on people who are poor, people who are hungry, people who are weeping, people who have been rejected and reviled for their trust in Christ. Ordinarily these people would be considered cursed. We know that not because we think society was like that back then, but because we know that’s how society is now. We live in a world where poor, hungry and weeping people are largely ignored. We don’t think of them as winners, as blessed.

Jesus offers his disciples a different vision of their world, and he invites them into a way of living that can make that vision a reality. So often we get hung up on this idea that Jesus was only interested in spiritual matters or in salvation in the hereafter. But over and over he lifts up the vision of a new world right now. And he places responsibility for enacting that vision

squarely in his disciples' laps. The way they live—loving their enemies, doing good to those who hate them, giving to everyone who begs from them, doing to others as they would have done to them—these are the behaviors that send ripples of change into the world so the poor, the hungry, the weeping can be seen and blessed.

The saints we have come to honor and venerate are those men and women in our lives who taught us how to live in ways that create goodness and blessing for those in need. They're the ones who have sent ripples of compassion and generosity and justice into the world that have shaped us and made us more faithful in our discipleship.

For Jesus, that discipleship is marked by living intentionally, by reflective action in the world that's aware of the effect we have on those around us. Discipleship is living for others. So, our first consideration when thinking about how we spend our money or where we shop or for whom we cast our votes is intended to be the impact these actions will have on others rather than ourselves. That's where the "politics" of blessing comes into play. Politics is about how we organize ourselves as a society: what values do we encourage, what kinds of systems are needed to promote the common good. We've been conditioned, through the media and political campaigns, to think about what's best "for me" when making political choices. But Jesus offers a different standard. He offers a vision of a world where the most vulnerable are blessed and encourages his followers to behave in ways, to make choices that will bring that vision to life.

Did those we honor today embrace that vision? Some did, I'm sure. The more important question is, are we able to embrace Jesus' vision. Their power to influence the world has ended; they did what they could with what they had. Now it's left to us. Even as we give thanks for the ways we've been influenced by the loved ones we've lost, we go forward to influence the world in whatever way we can to bring Jesus' vision of blessing for the poor, the hungry, the weeping to life. To take our place in the company of saints, to honor the memories of so many who have shown us what discipleship looks like, we commit ourselves anew to Jesus' vision of compassion and justice for the life of the world.

Amen