

All Saints Day

November 1, 2020

The Rev. Emily Richards

*God's Commonwealth of Love*

Every year on the occasion of All Saints Day we hear these eight strange blessings that Jesus gives to a people yearning to be free from the sufferings of their present circumstances. These poetic sayings rank right up there with the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty-third psalm as some of the most quoted words in the canon of scripture. This year in particular Jesus' blessings stir us with their stubborn hope. There is nothing normal about our lives right now. Living amid a global pandemic, economic and social upheaval, political division, a national racial reckoning and on top of it all, hurricanes, floods and raging fires cause us to wonder, What's next? How we gather, work, eat, serve, and pray has changed overnight. Every single element of our normal lives has been turned upside down. The world we inhabit now is a foreign landscape.

Over the past seven months I have longed for my normal life and the world I used to inhabit. It may not have been perfect; but at least it was familiar. The Beatitudes serve as a wake-up call. A reminder that the world, neither the pandemic world nor the pre-pandemic world is what God intends for us. With these unexpected words of blessing, Jesus teaches his followers then and now, about the world in which God calls us to participate. In the Christian Century magazine, the Rev. Layton Williams offers this reflection, "Jesus centers his promises on those who suffer, those who remain faithful in the face of hardship, those who focus themselves on compassion and care for others, on justice and righteousness, on making true peace for a better world for all. These are not the groups of people that our world tends to favor or exalt. In our dog-eat-dog world, the glory goes to the powerful. We celebrate those who are dominant, aggressive, and competitive. We reward those who prioritize themselves. Meanwhile, we avoid those who are suffering, we reject calls for justice and peace, and we see self-emptying concern for others as weakness. In the Beatitudes, Jesus makes a promise: that regardless of how this world fails the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the grieving, God's commonwealth or kin-dom will ultimately comfort and lift them up. No matter how the world mistreats them, God will ultimately be faithful to them."

Williams continues, “In times of crisis, our impulse as mortal creatures is to shore up our defenses and do whatever it takes to keep ourselves alive. But God has created us not simply to be mortal but to be moral. Our call from God is to have a broader vision of care for all people. Those who do this, Jesus says, are blessed. Perhaps not in the world that we know—the one that props up powers and principalities, that celebrates individual freedom over collective flourishing—but certainly in the kin-dom of God.” The Beatitudes give us both promise and purpose. God sees our suffering. Hears our cries. And will not forsake us. And as blessed ones of God’s kin-dom, we are to create that commonwealth of collective flourishing, where the welfare and well-being of all God’s beloved is our most pressing aim.

It is our tradition on this great Feast Day to welcome God’s beloved into the household of God through the waters of baptism. Parents of Hunter and Parker, we are not only celebrating the preciousness of your children among your family, but their preciousness in the eyes of God and among us, this faith community. Today they have been given a new identity - marked as Christ’s own forever. They have become members of a family that spans the generations, connected to that great cloud of witnesses we remember and honor this morning. In baptism Hunter and Parker are invited to participate with all of us in God’s kin-dom, to take up the legacy of all those who have gone before us. Baptism is the beginning of a lifelong process to love what God loves and to join in partnership with God to build a world animated by justice, peace and dignity for all. As the waters wash over Hunter and Parker, the baptismal promises will wash over us, calling us once again to embrace and embody the stubborn hope found in the Beatitudes.

Two days from now we will engage in an election like no other in my lifetime. Many of us we are filled with great fear and anxiety at the divisiveness this election is producing. But I call on us all to cling that stubborn hope as we cast our votes and pray for our country. I pray that we will be reminded of Jesus’ eight blessings and be inspired by them as citizens of God’s commonwealth to support the flourishing of all people. Marked as Christ’s own forever, it is our moral and sacred duty to give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless, to not allow the cries of the suffering to go unheard. To lift up the brokenhearted and to let the oppressed go free.

When we cast our ballots, we do so not only for the sake of our ourselves, our children and grandchildren, but for our sisters and brothers in West Philly, for people of color who are dying in the streets of our cities, for the people along the Gulf coast who have lost their homes, for those out West who have been displaced by the fires, for the mothers separated from their children on the border, and for the people of Eastern Kentucky who are losing their loved ones due to the Opioid crisis. Our flourishing is connected to their flourishing. Our healing and wholeness are connected to the healing and wholeness of our fellow citizens, to the healing wholeness of our nation, and to all the peoples and creatures of this planet.

Sr. Joan Chittister, one of my living saints, gave a series of talks on The Uncommon Search for the Common Good in 2012. Her reflections relate to our collaborative work at this moment in time. She asserts, "If the common good is an overarching view of the way we want our world to operate, we have been given criteria by which to form it: The Beatitudes. ▪ It must be poor in spirit, ▪ in grief for those whose lives are grievous, ▪ humble in our relationships with others, ▪ merciful in our responses ▪ thirsting for justice in our dealings ▪ pure in heart about our motives and our behaviors, ▪ purveyors of peace ▪ and courageous and fearless in the positions we take in public on behalf of all these things. Then, as the old monastic teaches, we will have written the scriptures of a common good with our own lives. . . it will be clear that we have kept our eyes on the important things in life and fashioned a common good that changes this wandering weary world in the process. And most of all," she concludes, "Remember, unless we work for the common good, there won't be any.' The only question then is will we do our part of the process or not?"

With fearlessness and stubborn hope, let us go forth from this service continuing to share the Good News of the Beatitudes, bringing forth God's commonwealth of love, mercy and justice for the sake of our weary world. Amen.