

ALL SAINTS DAY, 2017 Matthew 5

In 1991, hard rock band Guns N Roses released a song that included the words, “Nothing lasts forever, we both know the heart can change, and It’s hard to hold a candle in the cold November rain.” “Nothing lasts forever.” Certainly that is true. This morning on All Saint’s Day we acknowledge honestly that truth. Nothing lasts forever, including us. We could also agree that “it’s hard to hold a candle in the cold November rain.” We could even add, “it’s hard to hold a candle in the cold November rain....or wind....or waves....or snow.” This is not an easy November in which to hold a candle. And yet this morning, for All Saint’s Day, we do light candles, the cold, wind, snow, waves, and rain outside, notwithstanding. We have lit our altar candles, as we always do; symbolic of God’s holy presence among us in our worship. We have lit our Paschal Candle, the candle of resurrection. This candle was lit a week and a day ago when little Emma Anderson, the Hubbartt’s great granddaughter, was baptized. It was lit a week and a month ago for Mabel Anderson’s memorial service. We light this candle for every Holy baptism, for every funeral or memorial service, for every Sunday in the season of Easter, and on All Saint’s Day. Because it *is* the candle of *resurrection*. In Holy Baptism, we are drowned in the waters of baptism and *resurrected* to new life in Christ. At the time of death, we claim that promise of *resurrection* into eternity with Christ. Throughout Easter we celebrate the power of *resurrection* and new life. And today, as we grieve and hope, that candle reminds us that God keeps us in God’s hands both in this life and in the life to come, *resurrected* life. We will use that flame of the paschal candle to light our candlelighter later in the service, when anyone who wishes may come forward to light a candle of remembrance for a loved one who has died in recent

years....perhaps for one of those four named on our list, perhaps for someone on your own personal list, whose name you may speak as you light the candle. “ It’s hard to light a candle in the cold November rain”....but we do. Our Lord *is* light, and God’s promises of new life hold true even in a dark and cold world.

This morning, in the midst of a dark and cold November, we have a lesson from Revelation, chapter 7, that is full of light and warmth. It holds up for us a vision of heaven, of resurrected life. It’s a larger than life vision, literally---a great multitude, unimaginable diversity of ethnicity and languages, voices raised in shouts and songs of praise, celestial creatures of unimaginable beauty, all worshipping at the throne of God, praising the Lamb of God, Christ. They no longer know sorrow or suffering, but are shepherded by the Lamb.

And in our Gospel lesson from Matthew, that same Lamb of God is teaching crowds on a mountain, speaking some of our most familiar and beloved Scriptural words: the Beatitudes. In which Christ declares that those very people whom the world scorns or writes off---the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers---are the very people whom God blesses most. This is that upside down way God has of seeing the world. This morning we look specifically at the second beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” This, too, is upside down thinking, because we do not generally think of those who grieve as being blest. We think of them as being sad or angry or lonely. And while we may empathize with them, we often also feel helpless or awkward around them, and we can’t help but wish they would get over it and be a little more chipper. We tend to exhibit the same lack of patience with ourselves in our grieving; “shouldn’t I be farther along than I am?”, we may wonder, as the weight of grief still

pulls us down. I recently read a wonderfully wise article, written by a student from St. Olaf college, Linden Smith, who lost her sister to a childhood cancer. She wrote, “Whenever I tell someone about my sister, it’s as if I’ve injured them. Often people avert their gaze, stutter, “I’m sorry” and change the subject. No one likes hearing about dead children. My sister died in September 2013 after an agonizing year long struggle with leukemia. Her death left me with an illness of my own: grief.” Linden goes on to write about her feeling of isolation in her grief, in that neither medication nor therapy could lift her spirits. She notes that in his book, “A Grief Observed,” C S Lewis wrote that the grieving are an embarrassment to everyone they meet, and he proposed a “leper colony for the grieving”—a place where the grieving could live away from the pressures of polite society. Deep grief, said Lewis, has become like a modern form of leprosy, and Linden concludes: “To the grieving: I wish someone had told me that I didn’t need to be ok. I want you to know that it’s ok to hurt. I hurt for nearly four years before coming to any real peace with my sister’s death.”

I was moved by this young woman’s witness to the power and reality of grief, and also to the disregard our culture tends to have towards grief and the grieving. We are uncomfortable with grief in ourselves or others; and we do not think of those who grieve as being blest, no matter what Jesus says. And today many of *us are* grieving. And why not? We have lost many people we loved, as well as other losses---dreams, homes, health, relationships, and so on. There is much to grieve.

Specifically, today we grieve those who have died in the last year. There are four names on our All Saint’s list this year. Sometimes we’ve had more. Occasionally we’ve had less. Each of these four was dearly loved by a good number of people. They

exemplify different types of death. Evelyn and Mabel lived long, full lives. Evelyn Salakka was 95 when she died, Mabel Anderson had just turned 90. Both were born in the roaring 1920s, the decade between the end of World War I, “the war to end all wars”, and the Great Depression of the 1929. They lived through scarcity, World War II, the availability of electricity, of automobiles, of television, of more recent technologies. They are deeply missed and grieved, but their deaths are not unexpected. In contrast, the deaths of Terry Berg and Mark Rubedor are much harder to accept in terms of their age and circumstances. Terry battled cancer for years and years and lost that battle before any of us were ready, and Mark was ill and died far too young also after a hard battle. All of these factors shape the nature of our grief. Because grief isn’t the same for everyone by any means. Grief can certainly be expressed in sorrow, as we might expect, but it can also be experienced as anger, as depression, as listlessness, as shock. There are a number of ways that grief has been described, some involving stages that people tend to work through, though not always in any particular order. One of the most helpful models I’ve found is a much simpler approach that suggests we forget about stages altogether and just recognize that while grieving you will tend to swing between two poles: grief over what you’ve lost and gratitude for what you still have. Either can predominate at any time in grieving. Grieving is as individual as we are, and as those we grieve *over* were.

And the four we name today were all wonderfully individual, weren’t they? Mark Rubedor, who loved to fish and to cook for his family---gee, where he did get those traits from?--; Terry Berg, whose huge heart and valiant faith ensnared us all; Evelyn Salakka, with her red lipstick and love of bling and fun loving ways; Mabel Anderson, with her sharp sense of humor and her beret perched jauntily off side on her head. Without much

effort, we can picture them, conjure them up, almost feel them here. And today on All Saint's Day, we recognize that in a sense, they *are* here. Not in a creepy, ghostly way, at all. But as part of the communion of saints, as part of that great community described in Revelation, as the other half of that altar rail, extending around the world and into heaven. They are part of us, and we of them. We still love them, remember them, and trust them into God's hands. That's the gift that All Saint's Day gives us.

I had a number of discussions about All Saint's Day this past week, with clergy colleagues and parishioners and friends. The most profound discussion, though, was at our Lectio Divina group last Tuesday, led by Randy Alreck. We essentially talked about how we relate to the dead. And that's a hugely significant topic, even if it makes us uncomfortable. We talked about how we can continue to love those who have died, and they us. We talked about how there can sometimes be healing or forgiveness in relationship with those who have died, at least on our part, as we gain a little distance and perhaps understand the person involved within the larger picture of their life and challenges. We talked about how we sometimes have that sense of connection *yet*, in ways large and small---a song heard on the radio, the sight of a piece of clothing or a cap, wearing a piece of legacy jewelry, or eating food cooked with an old recipe---a sense of connection through that communion of saints. We are apart, and yet, we are still held together in God's arms, which wrap around this life *and* the next life, encircling the cosmos in a timeless embrace.

"Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted", Jesus declared in our lesson today. Is it true? What do you think? I would attest to the truth of that through my own experience; I'm guessing most of you would also. I have grieved, most recently the

deaths of my mother-in-law and my mom. I *have been* comforted. Not all the time, not quickly, and not all at once. For perhaps a year after my Mom's death, I never burst into spontaneous song; now I do. I felt joy amidst sorrow, but I never felt light hearted; now I do. The color seemed leached out of everything, like a November day; now I see the colors. God was near and dear to me in my grieving, through people like yourselves, through words of Scripture, through verses of hymns, through looking at the full moon on dark nights. I have been comforted, and you tell me similar stories. Certainly we wouldn't seek out grief, in order to be blest! And we don't need to. No one is immune from loss. Grief will find us! But when we do grieve, we *are* blest. Because God comforts us, and we have a unique vulnerability to God's presence at such a time, and we recognize God's embrace in a way we otherwise may not experience. With the knowledge that God holds life, death, *and* resurrection in God's hands, we are blest, even as we mourn.

“It's hard to hold a candle in the cold November rain.” Yes, it is. But we light candles today in defiance of cold, darkness, snow and rain; in defiance of death, itself. We light candles knowing that Christ is our light and that nothing---no illness, no sorrow, no anger, no darkness---can separate us from Christ's love and light. We put our trust in the goodness and love of God, and that enables us to light and hold our candles of hope, even in the face of death. “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”
Amen.