

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:1-12

November 1, 2020



Loving God, Creator of life's vast diversity, we give you thanks and praise for the multitude of the saints. Amen.

About 20 years ago, I served for a short time at St. Luke's Church, Longsight, a part of inner-city Manchester, England, known for gun violence and economic decline. With all of the challenges surrounding the local population, the church had established a drop-in center for people suffering mental illness. At first I struggled to find my way. I was used to being busy and productive, and everything around me felt deathly slow. The priest-in-charge said ministry there was simply to be present to the person right in front of me. I was floundering, and he could see it.

Eventually I found my place, and started to sit in on art classes, through which I met James, a verbose lover of modern art, who each day, as if encountering me for the first time, would describe the ethereal wonders of French new realism artist Yves Klein. We became fast friends. In time, I began to value the sedate nature of things. The yoga classes carried out in painstaking slow motion. Worship, which practically eeked out in word and song. Sloth-like table tennis games that could take half an afternoon yet still finish abruptly midway through. I was being slowed down, gradually learning to receive the gift of all sorts of other human lives into my own.

Receiving the gift of others' lives is how we come to grow and flourish and shake off the crusty shell that too readily accepts that our way of seeing the world is the only way we're really willing to listen to. For 117 years, this church has borne witness to the enduring power the lives of others gifts us with when the vision we have for society becomes too narrow or small. I love this church because it expands who I am. I love that we gather people from across such a wide range of ages, and backgrounds, and zip-codes, and views of the world. How boring it would be if we all agreed about politics, or football, or God. I love the diversity of this parish in all its forms, and as much as these past many months have kept us from seeing one another, we have not stopped valuing the breadth and depth that we each gift to one another's lives.

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I know that because I have seen how much we have remained with one another through the months of this pandemic with small groups, online forums, virtual choirs, phone trees, and in a myriad of other small yet significant ways. Yet we have not just chosen to see the gift in one another's lives. We have attempted to reach out to others across this city and beyond. At Promise Youth and Community Center, Church of the Common Ground, Emmaus House, A. G. Rhodes Nursing Home, Good Samaritan Clinic, and the Atlanta Community Food Bank are all vital parts of our community to whom we have offered our support and care. With them, we have reached out to meet the needs of fellow Episcopalians across the nation and Anglicans across the globe, including the community of Lake Tanganyika Theological College in Tanzania.

This Commitment Sunday, your decision to make a financial pledge to All Saints' is a powerful act of support that says that you are with us in this work of being tenacious with our love and expansive in our generosity. It is a commitment that we will enable us in the year to come to be a church for others as well as for ourselves at this time of significant need.

As I ask God to bless your financial pledge to All Saints' today, might I also invite you to pledge to expand your own vision of what it means to share life with others? For if we are to remain faithful to the heart of All Saints' and continue to widen the circle of those whom we love, we know that this movement outward will change who we are too, a vision the scriptures proclaim today in the Book of Revelation.

It is a bewildering text to some, electrifying to others, wherein John envisions 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne' of God. Yet, this divinely ordered pluralism doesn't happen by edict or imposition. Faced with the One who sits on the throne is not to be passive subjects to an overpowering majesty, it is to be subject to the sovereignty of God that comes to us as servant, as brother, as friend, inviting us to be expanded by the breath-taking vision of diversity that God sees in all human life.

I love and celebrate that we welcome all gender expressions at All Saints', binary and non-binary. How wonderful it would be if we could open ourselves to change how we communicate and are present to one another as embodied children of God so that we even more deeply receive the gifts of other lives.

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I love and celebrate that we are on a path to learn more how to welcome people of all skin colors and ethnic identities in this church. How glorious it would be for us to ask what we can change about our life together and grow in our understanding of the varied experiences of others such that we can become an even truer reflection of and presence in this vibrantly technicolor city.

I love and celebrate as we seek to live out our baptismal covenant to respect the dignity of every human being that we welcome people of all socio-economic backgrounds in this parish. What new doors might we open up by learning to dismantle the barriers to inclusion, unconscious biases and unquestioned assumptions that unwittingly suggest to others that this is not a place where their lives might be embraced and valued.

Revelation's cosmic vision of 'the one who is seated on the throne' sheltering the multitudes of the earth, such that they will 'hunger and thirst no more', is the work of God that we are called to be saints for. We are called to see that multitude as God sees us all: as beloved, each belonging, all part of a creation being made new.

This country needs people like you just now to remind it of the gift of others' lives. What a perfect time this is for us to be a people for all the saints of God's wondrously diverse human family. Yet, it is easy for us to look at the world today, especially on the eve of a fractious election, and feel downbeat about the chances of us ever seeing the expansive pluralism envisioned in the scriptures in our own place and time. We are not called, though, to lose hope, we are called to be blessed by One who has seen the people of God struggle this way before.

Around 2000 years ago, a little known rabbi from Nazareth gathered some country folk on the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee. They were mostly very poor. They lived under a narcissistic, authoritarian ruler. Many people struggled to put food on the table, and many more suffered daily injustices. Yet there before them stood a man filled with the Holy Spirit, telling them that they were blessed, or as the Greek suggests he might have said, that they were deeply happy.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit', and 'those who mourn'; 'the meek', and 'the merciful'; 'the peacemakers', 'the pure in heart' and 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness', Jesus told them. Blessed, deeply happy, not because all of their world's problems were going away, but because of the one who was standing before them. Living bread for the hungry, Jesus, through whom God was putting the world to rights, bringing justice and righteousness to all through the most unlikely of candidates: each of them. They were called blessed, they were invited into a deep happiness, because God had chosen them to love and to change the world.

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Around 2000 years later, others gathered on that same hillside, perhaps where Jesus first proclaimed those words of hope. Huddled on rocks, listening to word and scripture and song, on the Mt of the Beatitudes. Close enough to hear one another breathe. Saints on pilgrimage from this block, bringing a little bit of our corner of the kingdom there, where Jesus himself had strode the earth.

It seems like a dream now that we were ever that close to one another. The support and sustenance, the laughter and joy we find as the saints, is not something we can enjoy and be nourished by now, yet we know that that time will come again. For now, we will gather online, or outdoors, or however we can, and remain steadfast bearers of those words of hope for one another and for all others. Blessed are the people of God, for to each of them belongs the kingdom of heaven.

I love and celebrate this church, as I know you do. Keep the faith, my beloved saints. For we are blessed, with the gifts of so many lives God is teaching us to love, now and forever. Amen.