

November 5, 2023
All Saints' Sunday A
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalms 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In Act II of Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, our star-crossed heroine wonders, "What's in a name?" In trying to make herself believe that Romeo's family name doesn't matter, Juliet says: "That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet."¹ Of course, she, and Romeo, learn that names do matter.

We, too, know that names matter, and that naming people and things gives us power, especially the power to include or exclude, the power to define the ins and the outs. We categorize other people constantly. Within a parish, we use terms like member/non-member, good giver/poor giver, believer/non-believer, regular/C&E (Christmas and Easter).

Of course, this is not limited to the church. In the tense and divided world "out there," our mania for naming (and finger pointing) has gone off the rails. Liberal/progressive, MAGA/Rhino, rich/poor, citizen/illegal, law abiding/criminal, you get the idea. Wherever it is that we stand, we often seek to gain power when we name.

Most of us, I think, were formed as youngsters to think in binary terms, to view the world as full of opposites. Yes or no. Up or down. Whether we grew up with *Goofus and Gallant*, or the *Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote*, or even *Spy vs. Spy*, we learned about the "Other," with a capital O. Naming people "Us" or "Them" seems to be the only reality we know. But...

Today, on this feast of All Saints, Matthew's version of the Beatitudes and the first letter of John remind us that God names us differently. God names us beloved; God names us blessed. This is not because we deserve, or can earn, blessing. God names us beloved and blessed because of who God is and what God does in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

¹ *Romeo and Juliet* (II, ii, 1-2).

The name that matters to God — the name that identifies us as God's — is child. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are!* This is how God names us: beloved, blessed, children of God.

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I have a favorite definition of saint that comes from the late writer Michael Malone's 2001 thriller *First Lady*.² One of the characters asks a priest (a stock character in a murder mystery), "What makes a saint?" The priest answers, "If stars are the light, then I'd say saints are people the light shines through. Not just the famous saints... [*like the ones in our beautiful windows*] But the everyday saints around us in the world. Light shines through them and illuminates what they see. The light just goes right through them to what they love so that we can see its beauty. They don't get in the way because they're looking too."

Saints are people the light shines through, and they're everywhere. Hold on to that thought.

Today we hear Matthew's version of the Beatitudes. The impact of this famous passage has been dulled, I think, because we tend to concentrate on the second half of each verse, the fulfillment half — "for they will be..." I want you to listen for a moment to the actual list of those whom Jesus calls blessed.

The poor in spirit
Those who mourn
The meek
Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness
The merciful
The pure in heart
The peacemakers
The persecuted
The reviled.

Poverty, hunger, mourning, hatred, exclusion, loathing, and defamation. This sounds less like a list of blessings than a litany of vulnerability. Vulnerability is awkward. Vulnerability is uncomfortable. Vulnerability leads us to spend our days trying to create the illusion that we are invulnerable, that we are self-sufficient, not dependent on anything or anyone. We are not poor or hungry or sad or unloved or any of the rest of it!

And yet, vulnerability is a huge part of what makes us human. No matter how hard we try, no matter how thick our walls or how solid our gates, fears of being

² Michael Malone, *First Lady* (2011), p. 426.

vulnerable plague us all. Maybe, deep down, where we don't like to look, we know that we are, in fact, vulnerable, but we still feel the need to put up a front – especially in these days.

In his New York Times column from this past Friday, David Brooks³ posed this question – “isn't it dangerous to be vulnerable toward others where there is so much bitterness, betrayal and pain all around? My answer to that question is: Yes, it is dangerous. But it is also dangerous to be hardened and calloused over by hard times. It is also dangerous, as C.S. Lewis put it, to guard your heart so thoroughly that you make it “unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.”⁴

Without acknowledging, and living with, our vulnerability, the light of God that wants to shine through us is blocked out, and we become opaque, lost, and alone.

But, remember what I said earlier. Saints are the people the light shines through, and they're everywhere. *The world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus' will.*

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Here's a story. Some years ago, I had a friend in one of the 12-Step fellowships. After we'd known each other for a couple of years, he told me about some horrific things that had happened to him as a boy. The trauma of those events left the kind of enduring pain that makes self-medication with alcohol and drugs seem like a good idea at the time.

We got to chatting about a famous passage in AA's *Big Book*, where we are told that “no matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.”⁵ He asked if I really believed that God might use him *despite* what happened to him. I don't know why, but I looked at him for a moment and said I believed that God would use him *because* of what happened to him.

I wasn't trying to justify or explain away his pain. But I wanted him to imagine that God is big enough, that God is good enough, to redeem his suffering, and through it, to work for the good of others, just as God worked through Christ's suffering to redeem the world.

I just said that I didn't know why I said those words. But that's a fib. I know exactly why. If my journey through life, both before and after recovery, has taught me anything, it is that resurrection is always possible. Always. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has shown the world that death – in any and all of its forms – is not now, nor ever shall be, the end.

³David Brooks, *How to Stay Sane in Brutalizing Times*, New York Times, November 2, 2023.

⁴From C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

⁵From The 9th Step Promises, pp. 83-84 of *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*.

God is never finished with us. Any of us. *What we will be has not yet been revealed.* Whatever the work may be, God will take our actual lives, our personalities and experiences, our strengths and limitations, our accomplishments and regrets, our rewards and every single one of our scars, and use everything that is in us for the good of others, for the building up of God's kingdom.

On its good days, the Church is a place that reminds us that vulnerability is not something to shun or deny. Gathered together here at this altar, where Christ offers himself to us in his brokenness, we are reminded of God's promise to meet us precisely where we are vulnerable or needy or broken...the very places that God calls us blessed.

So then, perhaps vulnerability and transparency are related. And that, just maybe, to recognize your own vulnerability is what it means to be a saint. Not to be perfect, like a plaster statue, or even to be particularly pious, but to be vulnerable, and in that vulnerability to let God's light shine through you onto God's beloved world.

On All Saints' Sunday, we sing *yet all are one in thee, for all are thine!* Today, we celebrate our common bond with Christians of all times and places: people of every gender, of all ethnicities and races, of all sorts and conditions, joined together through baptism as one Body. When we are baptized, we are grafted onto the communion of saints, not because of who we are, or what we have, or what we've done, but because in Christ, God calls us blessed and beloved children, God marks us as Christ's own forever, and God sends us into the world to witness to the great Good News that God loves you.

At the end of the day, what I do know is this. Each and every one of you has been named a child of God – blessed, beloved, and cherished. You one of a countless throng, and you are one of a kind. I also know that God desires to make himself known to the world through you. Let that light shine! Amen.