

The Church of the Holy Cross
The Feast of All Saints
November 6, 2011
The Rev. Wes Smedley

For All the Saints

The feast day of All Saints has at least two meanings in the Christian tradition that exist side by side, sometimes in creative tension with each other. There is the traditional sense of a saint, that I remember from my acolyting days: St. Vincent is apparently the patron saint of acolytes, and I remember tossing up some boyhood prayers for his help in those terrifying moments before the service began. And then there is the other sense of saint, the person or people who have shown you something of God: for me my Quaker great-grandmother, Ida, who upon hearing my intention to be a minister, said in her very old-school Quaker way, “Well, thee knows, we are all ministers.” Thank you, Saint Ida.

The truth is we are all here today because of someone else’s love for God that poured out into a tangible experience of God for us. A parent or grandparent who took us to church; someone who loved us love when we were unlovable, revealing the nature of God; a friend or spouse of child who drew us out of our self-enclosed worlds when we needed it most, who showed us kindness and meant it. We are each and every one of us here because of some host of saints who have gone before us.

I knew a saint in my time serving a church in Philadelphia. Sister Mary Scullion wore blue jeans and swore like a sailor. She brokered deals with Philadelphia’s toughest politicians and raised money with ruthless tenacity. A Roman Catholic nun, she is the CEO for Project Home, one of the most comprehensive programs to end homelessness in the country. But as busy as she was, she always made it her practice one night out of every week to search the darkest alleys for homeless people who needed help.

Mary’s soft-spoken assistant graciously invited me--newly ordained deacon, new to the neighborhood, new starched black clerical shirt and bright white collar, new at just about everything--to accompany the two of them one fall night. It was cold I remember, and dark even with the street lamps. No small talk with Mary, just mission. Had to quick-step-it to keep up with her.

Within minutes she saw someone. “How to approach this man?” I thought. He was a shaggy looking Caucasian guy with a bike. Long stringy hair, skinny, unkempt. How to start the conversation, how to steer it into the sensitive topics of addiction, affordable housing, job stuff, his physical health and safety. How to appear non-threatening—I knew that part, learned to come alongside someone so they don’t feel threatened. Slowly get to know the person, hear his story, offer some general comfort and consolation, timidly offer a couple resources if he’s up for it. Gently encourage him to consider. But stand back, Wes, watch and learn from Mary. Wait for her cue.

Mary strode up to this man at full pace and stopped just a few inches from him, face to face and head to head, directly in front of him. “Are you addicted to drugs?” she asked. “Oh Lord,” I thought, this is not good, not going to end well. Every instinct and every shred of learning about personal boundaries, invasive questioning, confrontational body language was blaring warning signs in my head.

Until I saw him look up at her—his face--the most intelligent, sparkling, kind blue eyes, and he said with perfect clarity, as though we had asked the weather for tomorrow, “Yes, I am. I have been addicted to crack cocaine for four months, and I can’t stop. I’m stuck. I used to be a tour guide for the historical sites, but I lost my job and have no money. I can’t get myself out. Can you help?”

With his consent Mary pulled out her cell phone and called the van. It picked him up and took him directly to the rehabilitation center. Before I knew it I was locking his bike in the church office and we were off down another alley.

Months later the man's story was on the front page of the organization's newsletter. He had come through the rehab, was living in a transitional housing arrangement, and he was back working as a tour guide. He described the confrontation as a pivotal moment, a holy event, in his life.

It has struck me since then that Mary was not going on her nighttime excursions out of a sense of noblesse oblige, or to get community hours or try an "outreach" project that would take her out of her comfort zone and expand her horizons. That pretty much explained my own intent.

This was Mary, not offering or inviting or encouraging Jesus' vision in the Sermon on the Mount. This was her facing down the powers of death and dehumanization with the greater power of God's holy Word. This was her proclaiming and performing the truth of Jesus' vision in the Sermon on the Mount. Not as a nice idea or helpful concept, not as a gentle suggestion or one of many possibilities. Mary had the gift of sight—she could see. And once you see right, you can start to set the world right. She actually believed what Jesus said about the poor in spirit possessing the kingdom of God; she actually believed that those who mourn can be comforted, that the meek will inherit the earth, that those who are stuck can get unstuck and know God; that victims of addiction can become empowered disciples of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus takes center stage in Matthew's Gospel to impart his first teaching act, the new Moses at the top of a mountain, he does not begin with a Thou Shalt or a Thou Shalt Not. He trains his disciples to see correctly. Christian ethics, he implies, is not about thinking clearly and making rational choices. It is a way of seeing the world.

When Mary saw this man we encountered, she saw with God's sight:
Instead of the invisible hand at work, she saw a child of God;
Instead of a dangerous neighborhood, she saw an area stuck in the cycles of poverty and violence;
Instead of a lost cause, she saw the opportunity to set a captive free;
Instead of a lazy indigent, she saw the inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

Her sight exposed the forces of dehumanization and death that we assume to be the norm. The societal force that recoil in disgust, ignores and denies; the cultural force that blame, the religious forces that exclude, the economic force that devalue human life.

Today we celebrate the saints in our life, in our world, who give us the gift of sight. And we pray:

If the grace of seeing were mine this day
I would glimpse you, O God, in all that lives.
Grant me the grace of seeing this day.
Grant me the grace of seeing.

Amen.