

The Rev. Callie Swanlund

6 November, 2022

I'm about to say something really controversial.

I love the hymn "I Sing A Song Of The Saints Of God," perhaps you know the one. [Singing]...and one was a soldier and one was a priest and one was slain by a fierce wild beast." I mean who who doesn't love that? Apparently, a lot of people don't love that, it's one of those contentious hymns in Episcopal world. Regardless of your feeling about this All Saints Day chestnut, perhaps you can recall the final stanza: "You can meet them in school or in lanes or at sea, in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea, for the saints of God are just folk like me and I mean to be one too." If that last line resonates with you in any way, longing to live a life worthy of saintly status, then this morning's Gospel is a perfect how-to guide. Those of us who wish to embody the traits of saintly life need look no further than the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes that we heard this morning in the Gospel. In the Beatitudes we find four blessings, followed by four woes, four encouragements, and then four deterrents. And if those aren't enough, if those are too abstract, Jesus gets really plain. He gives some specific examples: love your enemies, offer the other cheek, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

These might seem steep, these might seem unachievable, but I imagine we can all picture someone who has lived a life according to these proclamations.

Not all saints are Mother Teresa, devoting their life to orphans in Calcutta. Some of them look like you and perhaps even like me when I first walked into the church of Saint Gregory of Nissa in San Francisco. I immediately knew that I was at home. Of course there was the phenomenal acoustic and the exquisite collection of Ethiopian crosses, but more captivating than all of that, what drew me in most, was the mural of larger than life saints who quite literally surrounded me. Keeping with Saint Gregory's custom, each of these nine foot saints painted around the rotunda was depicted in dance. Hand in hand or hand resting on the shoulder of another. At the center of the circle of saints of course stood none other than Jesus. One knee raised in step and hand outstretched ready to invite any of us to join the dance. Perhaps you've seen the pictures or are familiar with this work of art in one of our most unique Episcopal churches: the likenesses of Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila dancing alongside those of Dan Frank, Lady Godiva, and Malcolm X. But on the first day when I encountered them the mural was unfinished. This was a large artistic undertaking painted in several stages over several years but for me it sent a bigger message than incompleteness. It sent the message that there was room, that there was always still room in the sacred dance, with Jesus at its center.

On this All Saints Sunday we get to join in that dance. We get to remember those who have gone before and we get to create space for those who will come after. Earlier this week on the actual day of All Saints Day, November 1st, several of us gathered right over here in the Mary Chapel for an All Saints Day Eucharist. We shared the stories of those whom we love but see no longer. It was intimate and sacred and

the space came alive with the saints of our own lives. I wonder, who is that person for you, who is that person in your life who in their time here on Earth strived to live according to the Beatitudes, who strived to lead their life with love. Picture them now.

Who is it that, who tried to live into that principle “do unto others as you would have them do unto you?” Now I'm going to invite you to do something vulnerable here. You don't have to but I'm going to invite you to do it, and I'm going to invite you to picture this painting of Jesus with his gentle hand outstretched: an invitation. I'm going to ask you to turn to someone else, perhaps even someone you don't know, and to share the name of someone who you've loved and lost, someone who has tried to embody the Beatitudes. If you're joining us online you're welcome to write the name in the chat and if you'd prefer to sit there in quiet and reflect on this person that's fine too, but I'm going to give you a few minutes right now. I'm gonna ask you, turn, find someone else, share the name and a brief story or description of someone you have loved and lost. Go ahead.

As I looked out among you I saw smiles, I saw tears, I saw the showing of photos.

I invite you to continue those conversations, just as we would after a funeral we would gather over a luncheon, and we would share the stories of one who has died. It is through telling those stories, it is through remembering these people that they stay alive with us, that their story lives on through us. On this All Saints Sunday we remember the big “S” Saints, we remember the well-known Saints, but we also remember so many more. We remember the faithful and exemplary people who have served God with their words and lives and who have gone before us. In many ways it's a Feast, an occasion for celebration and dancing, but it too is a day on which we will read the names of our loved ones who have died in this past year. It's a day when we remember all of the lives lost for whom our hearts still ache, which also makes it an occasion for lamentation and for mourning. It is in this place between mourning and dancing that we find ourselves, whether this Feast of All Saints is feast or fast for you, whether it's cause for celebration or for weeping, whether it's an occasion for mourning or for dancing, you are in good company. There is room for all of us in that Sacred Circle.

For they lived not only in ages past: there are hundreds of thousands still. the world is bright with the joyous Saints [singing] who love to do Jesus' will, you can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church, shore and trains, or in shops, or at tea, for the saints of God are just folk like me and I need to be one too.”

Amen.