

All Saints' Day November 1, 2020

This past Friday evening I spoke at a vigil in Montpelier to “Honor Democracy.” One of our local peacemakers, Joseph Gainza, organized this vigil as an attempt to lower the temperature as we move closer to the election. I appreciated the invitation to speak because it made me reflect a bit on the nature of our democracy, and I’d like to take a moment and share those reflections with you, too.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

These words, of course, are the Preamble to the United States Constitution. It came into effect in 1789, and it is how we have chosen to put our democratic ideals into effect in our nation. Over the course of more than two centuries, we have followed this lead.

I particularly think the phrase, “in Order to form a more perfect Union,” is the key to this democratic revolution, the revolution that continues to our own day. I believe that it shows that for all of us, democracy is aspirational: we aspire together to strive for justice for all, for security for all and freedom for all. It is never perfect, but we strive for a more perfect Union, that “We the people,” will make together.

I think it falls to each generation to take up this democratic task: history shows us the struggles undertaken by our forbearers: to abolish slavery, to claim equal rights for women, to recognize the vital interests of labor.

In our day, this care, this concern, this struggle, still engages us. We are called to bring our attention to preserving our democratic institutions, to act in this caring fashion, to aspire to a more perfect Union, protecting the rights of the LGBTQ community, respecting and making a place for immigrants who work so hard in our communities, and of course, to initiate strong policies to stop climate change and preserve our environment for future generations; all this is to do our part in making a more perfect Union. Democracy, rooted in the past, informed by our history, nevertheless always looks forward in hope, the hope of a better day yet to dawn, the hope of a future in which the general welfare is promoted for all and the hope that our aspirations will be fulfilled for the generations yet to come, that our more perfect Union will be the place for Freedom and Unity, to use our Vermont motto, for you and for me, for “We the people.”

Prayer: Most merciful God, on the All Saints’ Day, may your words and the examples of the saints strengthen our faith and our lives. This we do in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

In a fashion very similar to my musings about democracy, I believe that our Christian faith is both rooted in the past, but that it also looks forward in hope. And I believe this is especially true for our understanding on this All Saints’ Day. On the one hand, we look back to the example of our spiritual

ancestors, those forebears in faith who in the struggles of their lives, in their joys and in their distress, found the deep meaning of faith informing their lives and passing that legacy to subsequent generation. We hear these examples, from those known and from those unknown, but nevertheless their righteous deeds influence us in our day, helping to draw us closer to God's never failing mercy and care. As the writer of Ecclesiasticus has put it, "These also were godly ones, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; Their offspring will continue for ever, and their glory will never be blotted out." It is a point in the story of the people of Israel when they look back with pride at the strength and depth of faith shown by those who had gone before, in the lineage of their mothers and fathers, looking back in gratitude at their ability to meet the challenges they faced with God's grace and a spirit of courage and hope.

Even in the midst of looking back to the examples of the saints in the past, we are also bid simultaneously to look forward in hope: John, an early follower of Jesus was exiled to the isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. During this exile he had a vision, a vision of the coming kingdom of God and the struggles Christians would undergo, but also a vision of the ultimate victory of divine love and mercy. In the midst of this vision, John says, "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne

and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.” One quick footnote here: John says that this multitude is 144,000 strong, but I do not think we should take that number literally. As I’ve said before, but it bears repeating: for our early christian ancestors, this is a symbolic number, 12, a perfect number, times 12 again, times the biggest number they could think of, you know in the age before megabytes and gigabytes, one thousand is a really big number. It is like the numeric system of some people who live on an island in the southern Pacific Ocean: the only thing they count is coconuts, and their numerical system goes, one coconut, two coconuts, three coconuts, four coconuts, five coconuts, a bunch of coconuts, a big bunch of coconuts and more coconuts than you can count. And that’s what this multitude of 144,000 is, more coconuts than you can count. This is the multiple John looks forward to in hope. A multitude of all from every race and ethnic group, all included in this holy gathering of God’s people. John’s vision is a glimpse of a divine future of peace, all doing God’s will and God’s love at the center of all, taking care of all with a never-ending tenderness.

I was reminded of this double character of All Saints’ Day, both looking to the past but looking forward in hope, at our Diocesan Convention yesterday. We came together on Zoom, and actually I was very surprised to say that it worked pretty well, we had about one hundred eighty delegates together with

the Bishop. We discussed and passed two resolutions of note: the first was a call for all our parishes to find out more about the native land they occupy and more about the native people s the original inhabitants. We also discussed a resolution to devise a plan to make every parish free of fossil fuels and use only renewable energy by 2030. These resolutions look back and forward, looking back to come to some acknowledgement of the first inhabitants of this land and the second looking forward in hope to preserve the land and the environment for future generations.

I think at its best, this is what the celebration of All Saints' Day calls us to as well: we look back to the saints who have brought us to where we are today, the great saints of history, the holy women and men who have inspired so many, and the holy women and men who have touched our own lives, the family members and friends who brought us to the right course, and even today, perhaps years after their deaths, they continue to guide us today. But just as importantly, our faith points forward in hope, that God will restore us to righteousness, that God will bring all the saints together, more than we can possibly imagine, in a holy unity under God's most loving kindness. I know such a vision, such a hope seems a distant and unrealistic path today. At a time when we see more and deeper division throughout our society than ever before. But faith takes us beyond by rooting our vision in the past, in the everyday struggles and challenges saints have faced before, and in their faithful perseverance, we can find hope, in their example following the call of

Jesus, we can find for ourselves the strength, the courage and the faith to face these challenges of our new day.

In the midst of this life, however, in the midst of the challenges and struggles we meet and those that have confronted our spiritual ancestors, those saints we celebrate today, in the midst of all this we hear the words of Jesus, words spoken gently yet forcefully as he began the Sermon on the Mount, a word that we are blessed in this life. We are blessed, that it, we are surrounded by God's love, held in God's hand, our way forward is paved with God's grace... We are blessed despite our spiritual poverty, our mourning, our meekness; we are blessed as we hunger and thirst for justice, as we show mercy, as we have a purity of heart and as we seek peace for our world... we are blessed; blessed by God's love, ever behind us before us, over us and beneath us; surrounded by this blessed love as we continue our course of faith, following in the way Jesus leads. Yes, the times we face are difficult and seem extremely perilous; yes, the uncertainties of pandemic, presidential election and whatever else crops up in this year full of surprising uncertainties, yet we are also blessed at the same time, blessed in this struggle with God's loving grace surrounding us and lifting us up. There is an old Celtic prayer that I believe is fitting as a conclusion for this sermon on All Saints' Day:

God before me, God behind me, God above me, God beneath me.
I on your path O God, You O God, on my way.
In the twisting of the road, In the currents of the river
Be with me by day, Be with me by night
Be with me by day and by night. Amen.