

Feast of All the Saints

Mt 5.1-12

Several days ago, Dean Jones and I were discussing this morning's sermon. He said, "It will be All Saints Sunday, so be sure you talk about that." Then he said, "And we'll be doing some baptisms, so talk about that, too. And there will be family and guests here for the baptisms, so you should say something welcoming and hospitable. And it's our stewardship in-gathering, so it would be good if you could talk about that, too. And of course don't forget to mention the gospel. And keep it short."

So we have a lot going on today, but in fact there *is* something that ties together all these disparate themes, something that not only enables us to make sense of everything we're doing here today but that also enables us to make sense of how what we're doing *here* relates to what we'll do after we *leave* here.

Today we do several things: we celebrate the feast of all the saints . . . we baptize new members into the body of Christ . . . we pledge our time, talent, and treasure to the service of the Lord . . .and we hear a reminder from Jesus about what it means to be his disciple.

The theme that cuts across all of these is blessing. We are here today to *receive* God's blessing, and we are here today to order our lives in ways that will enable us to *be* a blessing.

Today we celebrate All Saints, and when we do that what we're doing is giving thanks for the variety of ways the lives and ministries of the saints are a blessing to the church and to the world. We remember apostles and martyrs, teachers and preachers, those who worked tirelessly for peace and justice in society and those who left society to be alone with God.

What we remember and celebrate about them is the blessing and the grace God gives to the world *through* them. We don't so much commemorate the saints themselves as much as we commemorate the fact they made themselves available to God, and that God then used them in extraordinary ways. Through the saints, the life and witness of the church was strengthened, and the world was brought just a little bit closer to the reign of God; blessing made manifest.

Of course, our celebration of All Saints is also an invitation, an opportunity for us to make *ourselves* available to God so that *we* might be a blessing. One thing for sure our celebration of All Saints tells us: God can use *anybody*. Take a look some time at the list of saints at the front of the Prayer Book: people from all walks of life and every level of society, from every tribe and every nation, women and men, rich and poor, well-educated and illiterate. Our calendar of saints makes the point that oftentimes God determines to use those we might think God is *least* likely to use.

So as we celebrate this feast day, let us give thanks for the grace God has poured out on the church and the world through his saints, and let us renew our commitment to make *ourselves* available to God so that, like them, our lives might testify to his power and glory and thereby be a blessing to the world.

Today we baptize new members into the Body of Christ, and when we do that what we're doing is asking God to bless them, to bless us, and to bless the world. We ask God to pour out his blessing on them and bind them to Christ, to deliver them from sin and death and to fill them with his Holy Spirit and open their hearts and minds to his grace and truth. In baptism, we both *ask* for God's blessing on those being joined to Christ, and we *give thanks* for God's blessing on those being joined to Christ.

But we're not only asking God to bless them, we're also asking God to bless *us*. Every time a new member is brought into the church, the whole church is transformed. Every life joined to Christ introduces new life into the church, and the life and witness of the church is thereby strengthened. The blessing God gives in baptism is not only for those being baptized, it's for all those who are joined to Christ and who together participate in his body.

And, of course, we're also asking God to bless the world. Baptism is never only about the church, it's also about the work we expect God to do *through* the church. All those baptized into Christ are joined to him precisely for the purpose of furthering his mission in the world. That's why the vows we make at baptism are so important: we vow to share in and contribute to the work of God in the world.

Do you remember the story of Hannah bringing her child Samuel to the temple? She brings her son to the high priest, Eli, and says, "I am lending him to the Lord for as long as he lives. He is given to the Lord." And then she leaves him there. That's what baptism is; we give ourselves and we give those we love over to God, expecting when we do so God will bless them and use them for his good purposes. We make them available to God so they may be blessed and may be a blessing to the world.

So today as we baptize new members into the fellowship of the church, let us give thanks to God for joining each of us to him as members of his body, and let us renew our commitment to continue in the apostle's teaching, to persevere in resisting evil, and to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.

Today we pledge our support to the church for the coming year, and when we do that what we're doing is asking God to take the offerings we make of our time, our talent, and our treasure and use them to be a blessing to the church and to the world. Like the young boy who had only five loaves and two fish to offer, or the poor widow who could only afford to offer two small mites, we give all that we can expecting that regardless of the size of the gift God will not only use it but multiply it.

If there's one thing that perhaps more than any other frustrates our ability to be good stewards of the gifts God has given to us, I think it might be this: low expectations. We don't really believe that God will use us or even could use us; we don't have the time, we don't have the resources, we don't have the skills. And, to be fair, that's right: *we* don't.

But faithful stewardship is not about *us*: it's about God, and it's about what God can do *with* us and *through* us despite the fact we may not feel as if we have much to offer. This is why it is perhaps especially appropriate that we pledge our support for the coming year on the same day

we celebrate the feast of all the saints: they didn't feel they had much to offer, either. And, to be fair, they didn't. But they were faithful; they made themselves available to God—all of themselves, not just some part of themselves—and through them God blessed the world.

Blessing is the theme that binds together all we do here this day. But if you've been paying close attention, you've probably noticed that there's one other theme that cuts across all we do here this day: today is not only about blessing, it's about brokenness. Not the brokenness of sin and death, but rather the fragile vulnerability of faith, of hope, and of love.

The powerful witness and testimony of the saints is a direct consequence of their emptiness before God. The gift of new life given in baptism—the outpouring of new life through the Holy Spirit—comes about in us only because we are joined to Christ in his surrender to God. Even our stewardship is nothing more than an indicator of our willingness to experience in our lives the kind of vulnerability that comes from making our time, talent, and treasure available first and foremost to God.

What we do here today—all the many things we do here this day—is dangerous. It's risky to be a saint, it's risky to be baptized, it's risky to offer some part of our lives to the service of God. By putting ourselves in the company of the saints, by incorporating new members into the body of Christ, by surrendering the stewardship of our lives, we place ourselves in a position of profound vulnerability and brokenness.

But we do so trusting that the grace and power God has given to the world—through his saints, through his church, and through his Son—will be sufficient to sustain us. We do this trusting that as we come to rely more and more on his grace and power, our lives will be more and more of a blessing, both to the church and to the world.

So let us dare greatly. Let us dare to be saints. Let us dare to live into the fullness of our baptism. Let us dare to surrender all of ourselves to God, trusting and expecting when we do so that he will use us in ways we can neither ask nor even imagine. And let us do all this expecting that as we learn how to *receive* the many blessings he has given to us our lives will *be* a blessing to the church and to the world, to the honor and glory of his Name. Amen.