

The Feast of All Saints – November 6, 2011
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Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10,22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Lo! What a Cloud of Witnesses

In the name of God the Creator of Love, God the Beloved, and God the Spirit of Love –

Lo! What a cloud of witnesses encompass us around! They, once like us with suffering tried, but now with glory crowned. Today I am drawn to this phrase from hymn 545, taken from Hebrews. There is so much happening today. It is the Feast of All Saints, our stewardship in gathering, your delegation is back from Diocesan Convention, we celebrate our successful brick sales for Haiti, and you've all had an extra hour of sleep! Now open your eyes and look around you and see the faces from the street surrounding you – these amazing photographs taken by Lorin Duckman. Because we are celebrating the Feast of All Saints today, we will hear as part of our service the names of those we love who died. We are surely surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in so many ways: you - the Saints sitting here in the nave, those earthly Saints who live among us on the streets looking at us from the walls of our sacred space, and those saints always with us who have passed from this temporal world to their reward in God's heavenly realm.

Today's reading from Revelation moved me and reminded me about God's welcome to all people, a welcome with no exceptions. *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... Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.*

Preparing for today's sermon, I assumed I would preach on The Beatitudes. Instead, I found myself drawn to the passage from Revelation. I looked at two commentaries on this passage: one by Marvin M. Ellison and the other by Barbara Brown Taylor. Ellison tells us, *The Book of Revelation is challenging for most North American Christians for a variety of reasons.* Ellison points out that the book comes from a dire time of severe political oppression and martyrdom. He continues, drawing from Christopher Rowland: *It is the product of a visionary's imagination rather than the careful passing on of tradition or articulation of an argument. It demands of its readers...a readiness to engage it at an imaginative level...the book is a classic example of art that stimulates rather than prescribes.* Barbara Brown Taylor writes: *Perhaps it would be helpful to point out that Revelation was not written to scare people but to comfort them.* It was written to comfort the oppressed. Many modern readers find Revelation frightening and disquieting, not comforting.

The comfort, however, is not for the rich, powerful and well to do, but rather for those who have come out of the great ordeal. The great ordeal in the time that the Book of Revelation was written referred to those Christians who - at the hands of the Roman

Empire - suffered martyrdom, torture, and economic and political oppression for their beliefs. What are our ordeals in the present time and who are our martyrs? Not all of the great ordeals are far from us; many are right here at home. Some of the ordeals on my list are: homelessness, flood, job loss and joblessness, environmental degradation, bullying, mental illness, disability, financial hardship and poverty, growing income disparity, inadequate health care, shrinking social services, illness, and death. I'm sure you can add your own ordeals to this list, both great and not so great. (The line between great and not so great is a difficult one to draw.)

Six of us, three lay delegates and three clergy delegates, have just returned from the annual Diocesan Convention, held Friday and yesterday at Mt. Snow in the deep south of Vermont. Driving there we saw some of the destruction of Tropical Storm Irene and heard some of the amazing stories of the ways that our entire Episcopal Diocese responded to this ordeal. Bonnie Anderson, the President of the House of Deputies, who was the key note speaker and preacher at convention, told us that representatives from Episcopal Relief and Development who visited Vermont to assess damage from Irene and determine the ERD response to it, said, "It is clear that this Diocese, the Diocese of Vermont, is a diocese with a heart." Bonnie then had us tell our own stories, in table groups, of significant events in our lives, some of them our own ordeals or triumphs that brought new insight, change, or even epiphany. Bonnie believes that our stories, not only help us understand each other, but inspire us to action.

She then showed us a clip of an address by the Rock Musician Bono at a National Prayer Breakfast. In his powerful message, after telling his own story of growing up in divided Ireland with a Catholic mother and protestant father, he challenged us to respond to the needs of the world. He said, "This is not about charity; it is about justice, and justice holds a higher standard, justice and equality. Justice always wants to hang out with equality, and equality is a real pain in the (a**) butt!" As part of my own mental process, as I was listening to and digesting this message, I added my own cerebral embroidery to Bono's charge. This is what I added, "Equality insists on inclusion and inclusion brings dignity." Charity demands justice; justice requires inclusion; inclusion brings dignity.

Our outreach activities here at St. Paul's Cathedral are founded in equality, inclusion, and dignity. Listen again to these words from the Book of Revelation: *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...* In the early chapters of Revelation we are told that 144,000 people were chosen from the world's population, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, to be marked with a seal on their foreheads for protection from was to come at the end time. But then, the author of Revelation took a second look – turning his head quickly to catch the sudden movement of an unmarked multitude behind him, perhaps glimpsed out of the corner of his eye, and is surprised at the people God really cares about.

God, I believe is not about the chosen, but rather cares deeply about the "great multitude that no one [except for God, can] count." God's multitude, the beloved people of God, are not about belonging to a nation, tribe, nationality, ethnicity or even a particular denomination – perhaps especially to a particular denomination. We are all completely loved by God, but I believe that God's focused concern is particularly for those who have experienced, or are experiencing, their own ordeals. Listen again to the

words of the writer when addressed by one of the members of the religious establishment: *Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* The message is clear; salvation is for all of us, not for a chosen few! Salvation is for those inside these walls, those on our walls, and those outside our walls. As soon as we limit love, compassion, communion or salvation to any select group, we attempt to put limits on justice.

What about us; are we the ones who know who they are? Personally, in my ministry as a deacon, I have experienced a profound change in my view of who they are. At the beginning of my diaconate here at St. Paul's, my least favorite job was meeting with people who came to us from the greater Burlington community, or called me asking for help. Most people began their story to me about why they needed help with an apology and an appreciation – even a kind of groveling - that went something like this. "Deacon, I'm so sorry to bother you and take up your valuable time. I'm not used to asking for help. My gas is about to be turned off – or - my electricy is going to be disconnected – or - I have no money for diapers for my children," and on-and-on. My discomfort rose not from a belief that these people did not need or deserve our help, but rather from my own uneasiness at putting any person, any one of God's children, in a one-down situation. Since my change in schedule that allows me to be here all day Wednesday, I have become more comfortable in my ability to offer help, and at the same time, support peoples' human dignity in this very personal exchange.

Additionally, our own congregation is becoming more economically diverse and our Cathedral building is increasingly in the middle of those in Burlington who need our support. Almost more compelling, engaging and energizing for me is that our congregation includes, as vitally contributing members, some of our homeless citizens. "They" have become "we!" and we are made stronger and more resilient. We now have the opportunity of extending the work of the saints who came before us, who we honor today, into the social justice work we do now. At our 11 o'clock service we will sing these words from hymn 625: *Ye blessed souls at rest, who ran this earthly race and now, from sin released, behold the Savior's face... Ye saints who toil below, adore your heavenly King, and onward as ye go some joyful anthem sing, take what he gives and praise him still, through good or ill, who ever lives!*

God exhorts us to continue through good or ill, and continue we will! We will continue by offering our financial resources as well as our most precious resource - time. Today is our stewardship in gathering that allows us to sustain this work. It is only in continuing to offer our resources - and in taking action to respond to the needs of all who worship with us, those waiting outside our walls, and all in our world - that we will create an inclusive community that ensures dignity and appreciates the humanity of all of God's children. My vision is that we become a place where charity becomes justice and justice is not charity, a place of God reflected in the last sentences of today's reading from Revelation: *[T]he one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and... will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

AMEN