

Sermons at Christ Church

Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.

All Saints Sunday
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Today is All Saints Sunday. It is a special day where we celebrate the saints of God who lived authentic lives. An authentic life isn't a perfect one, and we do not celebrate the saints because they were perfect people living among imperfect people. We celebrate the saints of God because of a unique character of life which isn't only worthy of emulation, but affirms the undying belief in God and the power of the good news of God made possible in Jesus Christ and his resurrection. We celebrate the saints because they lived authentic lives and they gave themselves enough room to grow.

The Latin root for authentic is *aut*-which means to grow or increase. Authenticity then brings the reward of increased self-knowledge and an awareness of a life which is true to itself and recognizes that we are all a work in progress, and for that reason, refuses to give up on itself and others. Authenticity represents the coming into maturity of our characters-who we are, the appreciation of who God created us to be and the burning desire to live into that purpose.

Authenticity isn't about perfection because God doesn't call us to perfection. Nor does God call us to righteousness, because none can and none will ever be. Rather, God calls us to a life shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be authentic is to recognize that you are not only a work in progress, but all are a work in progress, and as best as you can, you seek the transformation of yourself and others.

Today's gospel story is difficult-a message of blessings and woe. But as difficult as it may be, it nonetheless provides us with a road map to authentic living. Blessed are you who are poor-the point of life is not riches. Blessed are you who are hungry-the point of life isn't being full. Blessed are you who weep now-I was at my brother's memorial, and weeping didn't feel like a blessing. I couldn't gather the courage to look at my brother once more. I wanted to preserve the experience that I had with him a week before he passed. Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you

and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy. How is that even possible? How do I even celebrate being excluded, reviled or defamed for the sake of the gospel?

But in reality, that is the point of the gospel-that you are so in love with it, you are so enthralled by the power of the gospel that no defilement, shame of ostracization is enough for you to abandon the gospel of hope. Your belief in the power of the gospel is such that you offer all that you can to be the gospel, to preach the gospel and to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

St. Paul once said, the message of the gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing-and that is precisely why you cannot take offence at those who hate you because of the gospel. The saint, if you will is not afraid nor ashamed of the cost of that he or she has to pay for the gospel. In fact, a saint embraces the cost with all joy because the saint understand the value of the gospel.

How do I pray for my enemies or those who hate me? Conventional wisdom teaches us to revenge and to wish evil for our enemies and haters. Here's the difference between the saints who value authenticity, the saint is not about a zero-sum game, his or her life is about the ability to look towards unity and healing, and so the saint spares no moment to pray for his or her enemies, just to be prepared for the possibility of reconciliation.

Remember what Jesus said, if you are bringing your gift to the altar and remember that your brother has something against you, put your offering down, first be reconciled with your brother and then offer the gift. Reconciliation, healing, love and unity are the keys to authentic living.

There was once a conversation between a mother and a daughter who wouldn't forgive her brother. "There is always something left to love," says the mother, "and if you haven't learned that, you haven't learned anything. When do you think it's time to love and forgive somebody? When they've done good? When they've made you proud? The time to love somebody is when they are at their lowest because the world once whipped them so".

The saint understands the power of such redemptive love-it is pure and authentic. And that is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul offers glowing tribute to the Ephesians who have come to know Jesus Christ and the power of his resurrection.

In his thanksgiving for this congregation, Paul also prays for the spiritual enlightenment which will be necessary if they are to live authentic lives, if they are to know the hope to which they have been called, the inheritance that is available for them and the power for those who believe.

For those who believe, our hope sustains us, the glorious inheritance of which we are a part lift us up to see the best in everyone and all situations, and the power that is within us makes it possible for us to turn lives around and to look at ourselves, not with any sense of shame but with an eye toward God's mercy.

That is being authentic-because you see more than yourself in any picture, you find meaning in every picture because it includes you, God and others.

There's a story about Victor Frankl- a Jew who survived the holocaust and developed Logotherapy. It is a theory based on the premise that the primary motivational force of any one person is to find a meaning in life. Victor and his wife were both detained and were separated from each other. Victor later learned of his wife's passing. How do you pray for the people who killed her and have imprisoned you?

Victor wrote a book -*Man's Search for Meaning*. In his book, he narrates his own epiphany as he stumbled to work in the icy wind of his concentration camp. He writes: *"Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers; that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: the salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in the world may still know bliss...in utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way, man can achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.""*

As dehumanizing as his situation and that of many millions of Jews were, he could still find the light of glory that overcomes the stain of darkness. A saint sees that light in the midst of the darkest places in our lives-and works to make that light shine ever so brightly to overcome the darkness.

For that reason, saints don't give up on the human story-and you cannot give up on yourself or anyone. There's always room for growth.

I once visited a dying 90 year old woman on hospice. At her bedside were three wonderful children two males and a female. They appeared to be in their sixties. After a moment, I realized the sister who stood between the brothers was acting as an intermediary between them.

When one of the brothers wanted to communicate with the other, he would whisper to the sister, the sister will in-turn whisper to the other brother? He will nod his head, wait for a few moments, pull the sister, say something to her, and she will in turn convey the response to the other brother. This went on for some time before I dared to ask about the status of their relationship with each other. There was dead silence. I immediately took advantage of the opening: "What is it about what's going on that you do not understand? Here lies your dying mother whose wish may have been that each of you found it within yourself, the power to love the other, but here you are, unable to stand by each other and even communicate with each other. What is it about this picture that you do not understand?"

Paul says, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. For me, it means to live a life of blessedness-an authentic life that is so open to being transformed, a life that touches every sinew of human reality and prides itself with a sense of gratitude because it is grounded in the good news.

Remember this, an authentic life isn't a perfect life, but it is a life of blessedness and gratitude. One who lives an authentic life writes their own script, but that script always leaves a room for growth. As we welcome Zion and Reese into the household of God through baptism, may we teach them how to live authentically. Above all else, may we leave ourselves enough room for growth-for that's the way to be a saint. Amen.