



Let your Loneliness Cut More Deep

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 11-1-20
All Saints: Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 7:9-17*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

Today is the Feast of All Saints, one of the great feasts of the Christian liturgical year. We celebrate two kinds of saints: those ordinary Christians who did extraordinary things, like John the Baptist and Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King; and our loved ones who have died, who are also saints because the New Testament word "saint" just means someone who follows Jesus. In fact neither kind of saint were like superheroes or Avengers. They just had a humble willingness to open themselves to the grace of God, to do what they understood God asking of them. The church refers to saints as "Blessed" – "Blessed Mary," "Blessed John."

The gospel reading for All Saints describes those whom Jesus calls "blessed," which looks different from anything I normally associate with blessing. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted for justice's sake. Now in a way this does describe many of the saints of the church. Some of them

suffered a great deal, or were sacrificially generous. But you notice, Jesus **doesn't** say “Blessed are the poor in spirit who also give everything they are and have to follow Jesus,” or “blessed are the meek who achieve tremendous acts of courage and generosity,” or “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who are especially inspiring to future generations.” No, Jesus just calls blessed those who in a variety of ways are lowly or suffering or otherwise cracked wide open. Those whose hearts are so pure they see God everywhere. Those who seek peace, those who show mercy.

Why do you think Jesus can call these people blessed with a straight face? Does this risk asking for passivity in people who are being abused, or calling suffering redemptive? When you experience poverty of spirit—when you are so hungry to see justice in the world and it feels utterly hopeless—when you are in mourning, how can these things ever be a blessing?

Several years ago I was speaking with a mom whose teenaged daughter suffered from mental illness. This teenager was having a hard time, and how she chose to cope with it was to smoke a lot of weed. The parents were distraught—not because they didn't have sympathy, but because when the daughter was high she was so unlike herself, so unable to engage, and they missed her so much. It might be easy to judge this girl, but we all try to avoid suffering. Every addict in the world began using because it just made them feel better. Those of us who aren't addicts have other coping mechanisms, some of them healthy and some otherwise. A primal human response to suffering is to seek to be numb. And numbing is really helpful sometimes. But a chronic

pattern of being numb does something terribly destructive to the human spirit whether one is an addict or not. And a culture that is cut off from the ability to feel, and embrace the full range of human experience, is dangerous.

The Episcopal Church is the daughter of the Church of England, the Anglican Protestant church that came into existence at the time of the Reformation in Europe. During the Reformation violence broke out as people fought over shifting theology and power. But England watched this bloodshed occurring in continental Europe over differences in theology, and basically said, we aren't going to do that. So Anglicans developed a distaste for what they referred to as "enthusiasm"—perhaps meaning religious fanaticism that could lead to violence. They developed a helpful way to think about Christian faith, as relying on scripture, tradition and reason—so that reason and human experience always temper doctrine and theology. This culture continues today in our own Episcopal church, and many people appreciate our calm and beautiful liturgy, our non-manipulative approach to theology and prayer. This is one of our strengths.

But, my friends. The word "enthusiasm"—"en" "theos"—just means to be "filled with God." I wonder sometimes if our church's culture, and the culture of white America, might have gone too far in the other direction. A people that cannot feel, that cannot fall in love, that cannot allow their hearts to break, that cannot admit weakness, cannot delight in play and in small things, can do very great harm. It is said that Nazi guards in concentration camps were most horrifying because they could calmly play cards and quite literally feel nothing, feel fine, while

the gas chambers were murdering children a few yards away. Not letting the beauty and pain of the world touch us deeply can lead to extremes like that. It leads to a people that can calmly explain that it's the parents' fault and not my problem when we separate babies and children from their parents at the border, just as we separated indigenous children from their parents to stamp out their culture or sold slave children away from parents before that. Excessive numbing can lead us to seeing everything and everyone as objects, because numbing isn't selective, and it eradicates compassion—to the extreme of believing that we can possess other human beings and even the earth itself. I don't know for sure what Officer Chauvin was experiencing, but he appeared utterly detached and unfeeling as he knelt on George Floyd's neck while Mr. Floyd was so obviously suffering and begging for his life.

So chronic numbing is truly dangerous. But on the other hand my friends, it is overwhelming to take in all this hurt. We do need boundaries and it's hard to imagine that anything we can do will make any difference. But on the eve of the national election, when it's easy to simply sink into overwhelm and to get numb, let me say this.

What if Jesus calls those blessed who can sit in their poverty, their humility and grief and hunger and fear—and then, instead of numbing themselves or going into problem-solving hyperdrive, can open themselves to a Power greater than themselves? What if we could face the terrible harms being committed in today's world and allow our hearts to break more deeply, then truly turn to God for help?

In the Episcopal Church we don't talk about grace very much, and I'm going to put all my cards on the table and say, that's a shame. Grace is about God meeting us where we are powerless and perhaps even in the wrong, perhaps beyond hope—and exactly in that place, God offers us *change*. New eyes, a new heart, a new hope for transformation that we have no power to generate on our own. When you have nothing left to lose, when you've tried everything you can think of without any success, when you are in despair and at wit's end—this is when Jesus calls us blessed, perhaps because this is when God can finally get our attention and we can receive the power of God for healing at last.

There was a 14th century Sufi poet named Hafiz who said this:

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut you more deep. Let it ferment and season you as few human and even divine ingredients can. Something missing in my heart tonight has made my eyes so soft, my voice so tender, my need for God absolutely clear.¹

What is *your* state today? You may be very aware of a need for God. Or perhaps you're truly numb, or hopeful, or just working so hard you don't remember the last time you even slept well, let alone knew how you felt. But what if we could risk letting our hearts break, and discovering our need for God?

As we move toward November 3, let's ask God for eyes to see our nation as God sees it, in all its beauty and pain. Let's ask God for eyes and hearts to love all people, on the left and on the right

¹ Hafiz, "Absolutely Clear," accessed October 30, 2020 at <https://allpoetry.com/Absolutely-Clear>.

and at the absolute margins. Let's open ourselves to God's power and follow where the Spirit leads us.

We are not without hope. If you have not yet voted, I ask you with all my heart—please vote as an expression of faith. If anyone has any logistical issue with voting, please contact me and I will help you. But while this political time is critically important, voting is not the primary source of our hope. No matter what happens on Tuesday and the weeks following, the problems that have brought our nation to its knees will not just evaporate no matter who is elected President. So, let us not surrender to the temptation to go numb. Instead, let's allow our hearts to break more deeply. Let us also take deep delight in simple things, like teenagers giggling, and squirrels fighting over pumpkin seeds in your compost bin, and a baby's smile, and how amazingly good some people are at dancing. Let's open ourselves to the blessings Jesus promises—we who are so very ordinary, just like the ordinary saints before us who in the power of God did extraordinary things.

Where do you most need God?

Where do we most need God?

May we be blessed with the willingness to admit just how much we actually do need God's love and power. Then, perhaps God can use us for extraordinary things, for the healing of our hearts, Minneapolis, the world. Amen.