

Faith Mennonite Church  
November 6, 2011 – All Saints  
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“The strange, surprising way of saints”  
*Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17*

This morning, in two very different cadences, we have sung in celebration of the saints. The regal tones of Ralph Vaughan Williams’ setting of “For all the Saints” matches the worshipful lyrics of Revelation 7, reminding us of the holy saints, the martyrs, the ones throughout history who have remained faithful through the test of fire and of blood. In contrast, the soulful, “O when the saints” that conjures a New Orleans funeral procession, imagines a more rag-tag, not-so-holy crowd, that scrambled after Jesus in first century Palestine, and listened in awe as Jesus rewrote the script for the good life, the blessed life, the life of saints.

Both of our scripture texts this morning are “comfort texts.” They were first spoken and received as “soup for the soul,” as a pep talk in the middle of the marathon. They were like a finely crafted opinion column that cut through the despair, the confusion, and the babble of conflicting voices about what was happening in the crazy world. It’s easy to lose touch with their potency when, as has happened with the beatitudes, they become so familiar that a general audience gets the joke when a Monty Python character says “Blessed are the cheesemakers! We all need cheese!”

I suppose that some folks did laugh at Jesus when he said “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” A few of the ragtag followers may have thought: “What do you mean, Jesus? Blessed?!” “No way! We don’t want to be poor...we’re tired of being poor...we’ve had enough of being meek...of being persecuted and humiliated.” And certainly if there were any establishment “minders” in the crowd, they would have thought “Sure, sure, you can have your poor and your meek, but that’s not where the real action is.”

Even the writer Matthew seems to be setting the stage for a very different speech. Matthew’s gospel begins with a royal birth—a genealogy that goes back to King David...magi that take notice, sending the paranoid King Herod into a panic that a new king was on the horizon... As Jesus enters his ministry and begins teaching and healing, the crowds gather and increase. Anticipation grows as he goes up a mountain, a location reminiscent of Moses and Elijah, the great leaders of the past. You can almost feel the excitement and hear the chants, “Yes we can!”

But Jesus walked away from the crowd and the frenzy and sat down with his disciples, the ones he called to follow most closely. He explained his platform and it was nothing like they’d heard. The zealots and other revolutionary groups were plotting ways to overthrow the Roman occupation, or at least chip away at the edges with lots of aggravation. But Jesus spoke a very different message.

For Jesus, the real revolution—the kingdom—was already present. It wasn’t something to create but something to acknowledge and live into. The kingdom was already present in the poor in Spirit. It was present in the ones who mourned. It was present in the meek...the ones who were hungering and thirsting for justice...the ones who showed mercy...the pure in heart...the peacemakers... the ones who were being persecuted and falsely accused. He was talking in the present tense and in first person. He knew that the people he was describing were sitting in front of him. You—the 99%—are the privileged ones in God’s economy, because these are the ways of God. This is the nature of God. God is a God of love, of compassion, of mercy, of justice, and God grieves when God’s children are persecuted. As we walk in these ways we are already experiencing God’s kingdom, we are God’s children.

And so we sing with the brass band walking through the streets, “O when the saints go marching in...O, Lord, I want to be in that number.” I am a saint...you are a saint. We’re not perfect. We don’t perform miracles. But we show mercy and seek to be pure in heart. We mourn for the ones we love and we mourn because we hunger for justice in a world so full of injustice. We get tired and burn-out, but we seek the peace, we visit people in the hospital, we make meals for our friends and fill shopping bags for ones we don’t even know.

Perhaps some of you heard the NPR Morning Edition series this week about cyber warfare. One morning as Jacob and I were having breakfast and listening to one of the segments, the reporter commented on the fact that cyber warfare, like nuclear warfare, is highly risky because if one side is successful in attacking, they can almost be certain that, over time, their opponent will obtain the capacity to reciprocate. If you knock out a nuclear power plant your enemy is building, you have to expect that they'll someday knock out a critical part of your infrastructure. Just moments earlier I had read the beatitudes in my morning quiet time. The contrast jumped out at me: if you dole out mercy, compassion, and peace toward your enemies you don't have to worry about them reciprocating in-kind. In fact you hope that they will!

But enemies won't always be won over, in our timing, at least. The powers of evil don't give in easily. Jesus didn't promise that the persecution would end; rather he said that being persecuted isn't a sign of being forgotten by God. In fact, it's the opposite. Following God and being in touch with God's intentions may well invite resistance. That's what happened to the prophets. That was the path that Jesus, too, would follow.

That is what was happening when the book of Revelation was written. The followers of Jesus believed so strongly in the kingdom of God that they would not offer their allegiance to Rome and its emperor, nor would they take up arms to defend themselves. So they underwent periods of severe persecution. Centuries later our Anabaptist forbearers, believing so strongly in the power of God's Spirit to breathe life into the gathering of Christians as they studied the Bible together, were hunted down, imprisoned, and killed by church-state leaders who felt their actions posed a threat to the established order. Their stories are recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

And today the prison bars continue to constrain innocents and blood continues to flow. Many people are living through the "great ordeal" of Revelation 7. The Mennonite Church in Congo has given witness to God's love through a 15-year-old war that has killed 5 million people and systematically used rape as a strategy. The Mennonite Church in Vietnam, less than 50 years old, has grown to 10,000 members despite government restrictions and detentions. Even this year, four years after having been given official status, one of the church's key leaders was brutalized in front of his family by security forces that came to his home and then took him away. They accused him of distributing pamphlets calling for protest.

How, we wonder, do people endure? How do they continue in such difficult situations? Of course we know very well that it is not only Christians who suffer. But the accounts we receive from our brothers and sisters in Congo, in Vietnam, and other places, confirm that they have heard and take courage from the words of Jesus, "Blessed are you." They take comfort in the vision of Revelation 7, believing that the Lamb, the one who also suffered, has won and is with God. God and the Lamb are gathering in the wounded ones from every nation, from every conflict, from every prejudice, from the most horrible situations we can imagine and bringing them to fresh water, and wiping away their tears.

This is the company we keep when we gather around the table of the Lamb. We are simply not a community of this finite place and time. We are a community of the Spirit that includes each of the persons named on our cloth this morning. It includes the saints in Congo, the saints in Vietnam, the saints in the homeless shelters and in the prisons. As we accept and receive the body and blood of Christ we become part of the great gathering, the cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints.