

The Reverend Beverly Dempsey
November 6, 2011

“Remembering Rightly”
Revelation 7: 9-17
Matthew 5: 1-12

All Saints Day, Building Preservation Dedication and Communion Sunday

For a while, I wore a certain cross that I considered to be beautiful. It wasn't anything elaborate. It was a simple, small, cross with a soft, matte gold finish. The strange thing - both about the truth that I purchased this cross and the fact that I wore it - is that it bore Jesus' image. You and I and most Protestants are accustomed to empty crosses, communicating the importance of Jesus' resurrection as God's answer to Christ's suffering death and all of those times when we desire an increase in hope. But I did purchase that cross and wear it for the longest time, hoping that I could live up to - or into - all that it represented for me. I guess a little of the back story might help.

I purchased the cross from a small gift shop at the entrance to the Papal Basilica of St Francis of Assisi. Joe and I visited the Basilica on a trip to Italy in 2001. We went out of our way to visit this little town. We felt drawn to it. To me, the town seemed to be blessed, in a way. Maybe even sacred. I bought this cross as if a cross purchased in Assisi could become a protector for me, and an article of the armor I would wear for Christ.

I've had an odd fondness for St. Francis for quite some time now. - Odd, since I'm neither Roman Catholic nor've had much exposure to Roman Catholicism before 1997. Yet, I've always thought of St. Francis to be a special, holy man, full of generosity toward others - especially the poor and certainly the animals. His writings have been called "instruments of the Spirit...for all who would deepen their Christian vocation."¹ His prayer, "Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace," is a favorite amongst many of us (and sung beautifully by the choir with Jeff Robator as soloist only a couple of weeks ago). Each year, many churches around the world - even Presbyterian churches nearby - have a special Blessing of the Animals service in his tradition. When I think of St Francis, I think loving thoughts of a man in a dark brown robe with a rope belt walking across a bright green field in Italy praying for us all, and I think I might like to become more like him.

St. Francis, like St. Clare and St. Luke and Paul and Matthew and Mark and John, even St. Joan of Arc, are thought to've lived especially holy lives focused on serving Jesus Christ. The ones who have been named Saint by the Roman Catholic Church were also known to be responsible for miracles in their lifetime, and more than occasionally met a martyr's death. Many of them like St. Francis transcend religious boundaries to become iconic figures across Christianity.

Now, some of these saints are also said to have key attributes that benefit people in a pinch. These are the Patron Saints. I had a friend who prayed to St Anthony and she found the purse she was looking for that afternoon. Really! I had another friend who buried a statue of St. Joseph in her yard and she sold her house that very weekend. I've never know anyone to pray to St. Quiteria.

¹ Regis Armstrong, OFM, CAP, and Ignatius Brady, OFM, compilers and translators, *Frances and Clare, The Complete Works*. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, Mahwah. 1982).

She's the one who's said to protect us against the bite of mad dogs. I guess that makes her the Patron Saints of mailmen.

But really, saints have been important in the church for a lot of reasons. Saints like Francis and Clare we treasure in our hearts as good and kind and faithful and generous. Saints like Anthony and Joseph and tens of others are saints some people hope will be there for us in sometimes peculiar ways.

As a Protestant, I wasn't raised to embrace this particular idea of saints. Quite frankly, it's a challenge to my sensibilities that one would pray to or request intercession from any person passed away other than Jesus Christ, himself. But I do appreciate the historic importance that the saints have held in the church through the centuries. - And as much as they've held a certain role in the historic church, they continue to hold a vital place in the Protestant church as well as the wider Christian community as the thread of hope that joins us together with people from every time and place who forever sing in Christ's name.

In the Protestant church like with a lot of Christian religions, we believe that there are hundreds of millions of saints. We are the baptized from the beginning of Christianity through today who are the spiritual union of the Christian church on earth. We are the ones who've lived in the confidence that God has knit us together to be one holy and mystical body with Christ, who bless one another with our love and our care and our compassion and all other gifts of the Spirit that are ours. Each of the saints in our great communion in a way comforts us and keeps us connected as a body of Christ from one generation to the next.

I think of Saint Frank Kearney, a caring and compassionate family man who sat with hundreds of grieving families, championed mission and promoted good stewardship in the church. I think of Saint Don Ohnegian, larger than life, who encouraged community service and scholarship, loved his family more than Christmas, and loved his church to a great defense. I think of Saint Raymond Handelman, a quiet man who served his country in World War II, the State of New Jersey, Little League and Boy Scouts of Ramsey, his church, his family - and, of course, all the neighborhood children. I think of Saint Elizabeth Wilding a child of this church who dedicated herself to our Sunday School girls and taught us all with her grace and her prayers until her passing last spring. I think of Saint Loretta Graham who honored many organizations in town and in the church with her active involvement and honored many women with her sincerity of friendship through the years. I think of Saint Peg Rumble, a compassionate leader in the church who cooked and baked, volunteered with hospice and took all sorts of people in. And I think of Saint Robert Halsted, a student of the Word and a theologian for the downtrodden until his very last days on earth.

Yet, for all that the Saints become for us, from St. Francis of Assisi to Ramsey's own Saint Loretta Graham, I have yet to find a saint in the history books or our own church rolls who is capable of ending our tears. That time will have to come when we, ourselves, are before the throne of God. It is then when God, Godself, will wipe away every one of the tears from our eyes. Until then, Jesus said, "Oh, the blessedness of those who mourn! for they will be comforted."

I wonder if this is one reason God leaves us with so many memories?

Now, we all know that some of the memories we have of the saints of our lives are filled with joy, while some of the memories of these saints are less comfortable. Unless we go through some experience of exorcism, it's impossible for us to choose whether or not to remember the breadth of memories we've had of the ones who've gone on before us. But while we can't usually

choose whether or not to remember, we do have the opportunity to choose how we're going to react to our memories. (The memories will always be there. But how we live with them is up to us.) If we stay trapped in our memories of how we felt leading up to the day our loved one died...if we stay attached to how we felt with our first sense of loss, our feelings of horror, our feelings of anger...If we sit transfixed on our sadness of that day, then we remain a slave to our past and perpetuate our mourning. We have to believe would not be pleasing to the one who has gone before us. Could we, at the same time we miss our saint at Thanksgiving, remember with joy the happiness he always brought and be grateful for this gift he gave us? Could we remember with pride how our dearly beloved father or mother or aunt or son took care of others and allow that sense of pride to take over our sense of loss?

It's not for us to decide whether to remember. It's for us to decide to remember as people of Christ. And a people of Christ are a people of hope who honor the past while looking forward with certainty of what is to come for us all.

Appropriating a published phrase from Miroslav Volf, Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, we might say that this would be "remembering rightly."² Such "remembering rightly" is what points us toward a new kind of remembering, in this case, remembering away from mourning toward the comfort Christ longs for us to know.

Now, I am not intending to suggest that we are to be ashamed of our tears. We are never to be ashamed of our tears. Remember the beautiful words from scripture, "Jesus wept. (John 11: 35, NRSV)" Rather, in the midst of our tears we can allow our memories to become, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transforming agents of healing from our Lord and all the saints who invite us to celebrate the lives of those who've gone on before us, not only knowing that it is through those memories that a bond is preserved between us, but that it is through those memories that we are brought comfort.

As we move through life constantly being reminded of those who've gone on before us, our lives can become a continual celebration of the great communion of saints. When we see children playing on the tree in our courtyard, we can remember with delight Saint Sharon Moffett, a young girl of this church who died of illness, and whose parents wanted us to always have a special way to remember her. When we hear about new arts programs at the Dater School, we can think of Saint Gretchen Dater, killed in the terrorist plane bombing over Lockerbie, Scotland, and experience a sense of pride. When we enter our freshly renovated church building, we can remember with gratitude the generosity so many of you have extended toward maintaining and enhancing this space for generations to come.

There is a saint for lost articles and there is a saint for lost souls. But I have yet to find a saint who can end our tears. Remembering rightly is one way we can honor the saints, be a comfort for all who mourn, and rise up to feel ourselves blessed until that day when we all sit around the throne of God. Amen.

² Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2006)