

November 1, 2020
All Saints (A)
United, Oak Park

A Year of Mourning

Given the year that we've already had, most of us have experienced an extended time of mourning in 2020. Whether or not any of our relatives or dear friends were among the people we remembered at the start of today's worship service, we have had so many other losses to face as well. We have missed celebrating significant milestones and occasions together in one another's lives. We have altered travel schedules and trips that we may have been planning for months or years. If we have loved ones who died since the middle of March, it's likely that the way we mourned their deaths was greatly altered. So at a time when many of us could use some holiday cheer, even those familiar and treasured routines will not likely be the same if fewer people travel to one another's homes.

Yes, there's plenty for us to mourn. Even though many of us have had opportunities to worship together in person during the last few months, we have done so in ways that our pre-pandemic selves could barely have recognized: no *singing* together, no *physical* exchanges of

peace with shaking hands or giving hugs, no coming forward to receive holy communion, and not even sharing in coffee and other refreshments afterwards. We are different.

And even if we are able to return to familiar social practices eventually, many of us will forever be changed by this experience. If we weren't germaphobes before the beginning of this year, we probably have become such persons now. We are washing our hands and using hand sanitizers like we never did before. We are regularly disinfecting many of the surfaces that we touch. We have tried on enough different face masks to have an opinion about the respective advantages of each of the various styles available to us. Many of us who don't like to think all that much about our advancing years are glad to be able to go to quieter senior hours when we do our grocery shopping. I was even proud that I was asked to prove my age on one occasion. It's been a number of years since I have been carded!

We have also faced other losses that are far beyond the superficial. We have lost trust in the ability of government leaders and the political process to deliver what we expect of them during times of crisis. We

wonder why the billions of dollars that we collectively spend on healthcare haven't been able to keep us better protected during a pandemic. We have despaired that the inequities dividing so many of our communities by race or economic strata have only grown wider during recent months.

The scripture readings we have heard this morning do provide us with considerable encouragement. While we wouldn't usually consider any of the images that Jesus lifts up in these verses from the fifth chapter of Matthew to be a blessed estate, they do address many continuing challenges. While few of us would mistake poverty, mourning, meekness, hunger, and being persecuted as signs of living the *good* life, what Jesus seems to have meant here was that even though we do endure hardships, even though we suffer, even though we may run into direct opposition for what our faith prompts us to do, we are still blessed by God. And we should not worry when we face these circumstances in life. We won't always have perfect days, living as Jesus' disciples, but Jesus will still be with us through all of our challenges.

That is an encouraging message primarily because of its honesty about the realities that many of us face. God calls all followers blessed when we do not take the easy roads. God calls us blessed when we join in solidarity with people who are not among the most beautiful, or powerful, or gifted.

So this is a day for us to remember people of faith who have worked in the midst of very daunting and difficult challenges throughout the world. We may think of saintly ancestors or pioneers who brought their faith and little else with them to a new country. We may think of grandparents who worked hard day and night so that their children would know a better life, even if they never attained much of it for themselves. We may think of people who have lived or who continue to live in harsh climates for religious faith, perhaps where aspects of their devotion have been outlawed or severely restricted.

We may be able to think of no greater model for being among the pure in heart in our world right now than health care workers who have been sacrificing time with their own families to serve people who are dealing with the coronavirus. As if the mission to serve in the middle of

life-threatening conditions wasn't enough of a challenge, a number of those same workers face quarantines and maybe less than an enthusiastic support for their efforts on their return back home.

Today we praise God for all people who bear the name of Christ, especially in the midst of adversity. To some folks these examples of hardship and severe challenges might give a rather gloomy depiction of the faith, but they can also be signs of incredible joy and resilience for us. When we have a deep conviction that God is with us even on the most difficult days we face, then that is a wonderful understanding of what our faith is truly about.

Not everything *will go our way* all the time just because we have faith. Neither will we be spared from tragedy because of our faith either. On the contrary, Jesus seemed to think that following him would send us headlong into those places that experience tremendous hurts. But we have the faith to endure and even thrive in the midst of these things. God also gives us the conviction to believe that we are following the way of Christ and that we are blessed for doing so.

Our ultimate reward for being a part of this saintly community is not that we would have our lives written and sung about several generations from now, but that we can count on being among the redeemed who are described so wonderfully in the book of Revelation: people who have suffered great ordeals and yet whose glory is in having been washed in the baptismal waters and joined to Christ the Lamb's death and resurrection for *all* of time.