

All Saints' Sunday, November 2, 2008
Sermon by the Rev'd A. Robert Hirschfeld
Grace Church, Amherst
Texts: Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

The philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset once said, "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are." "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are."

There are plenty of things claiming our attention these days, aren't there? The National election is in its home stretch, and a friend of mine told me he made a special call to his therapist for a prescription for an anti-anxiety medication. The doctor complied without question. There have been reports of people already nervous about what their life will be like after Tuesday, after the hourly polls are unplugged and they can't get their fix of politics. This is the first election that I've heard the phrase "political junkie." And there may be a national time of withdrawal. And if some are hooked on the polls, others are hooked on the hourly, or even minute-by-minute, electronic index of the stock markets. Many are hooked on both, watching, hoping for good signs, trying to see connections between the two lines, economy, politics, if one line goes down, another goes up; does one cause the other to rise or fall?

If you've ever had the experience of sitting near a patient's bed in an intensive care floor, you can see the parallels. The patient lies motionless, maybe alert, maybe not. Monitors flank the bed, beeping, lines on graphs showing heart rates, blood pressure, respiration, blood gasses. If once is not careful, one can get quite mesmerized by all the information, tricked into believing that just by staring at all the lights and graphs you can change the reality of what's happening, you can will the person into wellness. Sometimes that willing into wellness is no different from prayer, right? But more often, one forgets about the patient, the human being lying right there, and mistakes the machines and the readouts for the presence of the person. "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are." Are we just consumers of information, information junkies, or do we care for the soul of the person lying sick in front of us? Are we so concerned about the results of the election, that we forget about the health of the body, the body politic, the body of our community in Christ, the body of our neighbor, who may be suffering right next to us? The barrage of information claiming our attention can have the effect of making us less than human, less than holy. Thus, the prayer of the psalmist is especially fitting for these days: "Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; give me life in your ways." (Psalm 188:37)

It comes as a meet and right thing that today, two days before the election, we are urged to remember those who are without enough in our midst, that we are offering some canned goods and staples to the Survival Center, on this Souper Sunday. Even as some of us bite our fingernails and wring our hands at the latest polls, we are also to remember the body of our neighbor in need whom we are called by God to love as ourselves.

And moreover, the Church reminds us to remember on this All Saints' that we are citizens of another country, a country that extends infinitely beyond the troubled borders of the United States. We are members of the Communion of Saints, an utterly fascinating, wonderful, and mystical assembly of human beings fully alive in Jesus Christ. Vast numbers of the citizens of God's Realm have already passed through the curtain of death and now serve and rejoice around the throne of God, entered more deeply into the fellowship of the Holy Trinity. Many others serve God on this side of the great divide, they are with us, we have come to know them, and many love and serve God and their neighbor in quiet unheralded ways, even among us. The Church today, on this Feast of All Saints urges us to pay attention to our fellowship in the communion of all the saints, both in heaven, and on earth. Tell me to what you pay attention, and I will tell you who you are. I believe that by paying attention to the presence and activity of God, even in the sphere of our own lives, we will become more and more like the one who came among us to serve, to give himself up for us, to die even that we might live, and live with abundance, courage, hope, and grace.

Last week, I was shocked awake by an unmistakable awareness that we are surrounded by a powerful presence of God at work in our community, and in our church. It was as though God was saying to me, "Pay Attention! Behold!" Part of the fundamental job description of a priest is simply to point out the holy in the midst of the mundane—to urge the community to pay attention, behold who you are and what you are called to be. Jesus, our Great High Priest, did that, and in so doing he was fulfilling the role of countless priests, prophets, shamen, and holy people since the dawn of human civilization...to say, hey, pay attention, this is more than what you might think it is.

And that's what Jesus does in his Sermon on the Mount. The world thinks the truly happy, the truly fortunate are the wealthy, the healthy, the safe, the powerful, the judging, the manipulative, the warring, the ones everyone speaks well of. But, pay attention to the Constitution of God's Realm. It is quite different. In the Kingdom of God, it works like this, my friends, my beloved:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

And so Jesus gives us the "bill of the blessed," the order of the society of the holy.

Last week my attention was taken off the monitors, off the graphs, off what was secondary to what is essential to our life in Christ. Let me tell you how I came, again, to pay attention.

It's 8 o'clock in the morning. Five people gather in the Parker Room with their coffee mugs and printed emails. We have been meeting for over a year to discuss how the membership of Grace Church might address the perennially-agonizing conflict between the state of Israel and the people who live in the Palestinian Territories. We discuss words like Apartheid. We discuss words like Anti-Semitic. Boycott. Terrorism. Naïve. Complicit. Why bother? We recognize that the toxic conflict in the Middle East threatens to damage relationships among brothers and sisters in Christ here, but that group hangs in there, faithful, confident that God's love is stronger than anything, even hatred, even fear, even misunderstandings and our inability to tell the whole story. God is active in that work. It doesn't always feel like peace, but it feels like peacemaking. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be children of God.

It's 9:30 o'clock. People are coming into the Old Rectory. It's cold. The boiler was condemned and is waiting to be removed. It has asbestos so a special outfit has to come in to get rid of the old beast safely. Rubbing their hands together, they make coffee and tea, as they prepare to answer the phones, proofread the newsletter, fold the bulletins, begin assembling the budget for the coming year. They are chilly, but their hearts are warm as I hear laughter, words of encouragement, acts of kindness. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

10 o'clock. I walk to a funeral at St. Bridgits. A boy who was a classmate of my son, Henry, and of Alex and Thomas Perry, is to be buried. Weeks before there was a freak car accident, and Andres went without oxygen for an indeterminate length of time and was left in a coma for many days. Finally, he passed out of this life, leaving his mother and younger brother with memories of a playful, smart, cheerful loved one. We go to Wildwood Cemetery and I share in the committal, as his school friends, teachers, principal and family members place roses on his casket. No one wants to leave the place, even though the cemetery sexton needs us to leave so he can put the coffin in the ground. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

It's now about noon. The funeral party is arriving in our parish hall, greeted by women of our Funeral Guild. The women did not know the grieving family, and each have many things to do, but they have taken time out as they could. The night before, in preparation for the reception, they noticed that the tableware was still a bit dirty from a previous function. A number of the women hand wash the forks, spoons and knives, lay them out on a table cloth. No grieving mother or brother should have to have plastic at the funeral of their son, their brother. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

A little later, the children who came to the funeral are playing with stuffed animals, some of which belonged to the boy who died. One of the animals was tossed up into the air,

landing inside one of the light fixtures of the parish hall. The seven-year-old boy who just buried his older brother collapses in a fit of uncontrollable hysteria. One of the funeral guild women seeks out the help of a construction worker who happens to be just outside. Nick the laborer finds and retrieves a ladder, pulls down the stuffed platypus, and is able to comfort the grief-stricken boy and his friends. “You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world.”

It’s now 2 o’clock in the afternoon. The organ builder dictates a memo to Annie, the parish administrator, informing us of the danger of using the organ until the blower and the air reservoir are rebuilt. There really is not a Beatitude for this one. There were no organs on the Mount. But that’s not to say, Jesus’ heart will rejoice once we raise the money to fix ours.

It’s now 3 o’clock. A man I have not met before comes into the Old Rectory seeking assistance. I’ll call him Charlie. He is down on his luck. An alcoholic, now celebrating 10 years of sobriety, Charlie is a laborer who injured his ankle on a job. He will start work again with a landscaper and snowplow outfit, but in the meantime, he’s late on his rent at a sober house where other men commit to living lives free of substance abuse. If he doesn’t come up with the rent he risks not only being evicted, but the needed support and accountability of this community in recovery. I check out his references, and with the help of the funds donated by this church to the Rector’s Discretionary account, we are able to help him out. We pray for him, for the family he lost as a result of alcoholism, for his recovery, for the healing of his body, and in thanksgiving for having the strength and wisdom to know what he can and cannot change. Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It’s now early evening, and I am driving up to Ashfield to join friends, colleagues, and our bishop as we celebrate the new ministry of St. John’s Church and Eliot Moss their new Vicar. Listening to the radio on the way I hear a familiar voice. It is Alan Greenspan’s. He says he is shocked by what has happened in the economy and he confesses his misplaced trust in the self-interest of the financial institutions to make prudent decisions and policies for their own long term health. Borrowing from Luke’s version of Jesus sermon: Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

It is a dark chilly October night in the hilltowns, and this little church is warm and cheerful. It is a heartwarming event and Sue Crampton, the preacher, mentions one of my favorite books in her sermon. Encouraging the vicar and people of St. John’s to seek the will of God in all things, to seek God’s presence in the mysteries of our worship and prayer, she recalls the words of the Fox in St. Antoine Exupery’s, book *The Little Prince*. “Remember. What is essential is invisible to the eye.” We prayed for Eliot, his family, the good people of that small, yet strong parish of St. John’s that night. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we rejoice in the communion of saints...those people, all sinners, all redeemed, all imperfect and limited, but all made perfect and holy by the love of Jesus warming their hearts, warming our hearts. We are those whose attention is reoriented, shifted toward the blessed. And into this communion of saints we invite Edmund Sutton Heyes, being baptized. May Edmund, along with each of us, be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer. I pray that if anyone asks him or us, to what are we paying attention, we might say, the death-defying and glorious love of God, restoring the world. And may God see that love at work in our lives, today on this All Saints' Sunday, and every day until the last great Day when we rejoin those saints who have gone before us.