

Sermon: ALL SAINTS' DAY, November 1st, 2015

In the Name...

There was once an old sailor nearing the end of his days in a nursing home. He confessed to the chaplain that he had never been baptized and he now desired it. So, the chaplain brought a bowl of water to the bedside and began the service. All went well until he reached the question, "Do you renounce the Devil and all his works?" The sailor made no reply. Thinking that perhaps he hadn't been heard, the chaplain repeated louder, "Do you renounce the Devil and all his works?" At that, the old salt spoke up, "I heard you the first time, Father, but, do you think now's the time for me to be making enemies?"

Today is the Feast of All Saints', the day we celebrate the lives and witnesses of the baptized children of God who have gone before us to eternal life and glory with the Father. Now, there is an old saying that familiarity breeds contempt. Perhaps, nowhere is this truer than in church because it is in church that we experience the strange, the wondrous, the extra-ordinary on such a regular basis that it becomes familiar, unexceptional, and blasé. And what is this amazing thing we experience so routinely, so dispassionately? Nothing less than the power of God in the Holy Sacraments.

The Sacraments. The classic definition, which every Episcopalian should be able to recite off by heart, is: "The outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace". You all knew that, of course. The Sacraments are vehicles of God's power by which he does things to our souls.

Take the Eucharist for example. The common, ordinary elements of bread and wine become the flesh and blood of the Son of God so that, by eating them, we can be joined to Him. What did I just say? The common, ordinary elements of bread and wine become the flesh and blood of the Son of God so that, by eating them, we can be joined to Him.

My God - literally! We should expect to hear peals of thunder; the earth should shake; the chalice and ciborium should glow with unbearable brightness. But, that's not what we observe, is it?

We don't see anything dramatic and so, in a society which has conditioned us to overvalue the fabulous, we can undervalue the miraculous. And, as a result, the Eucharist becomes familiar, a Sunday routine, - nothing to get excited about. Yet the miracle happens, as most of them do, quietly, discreetly, without fanfare.

And the same is true about Baptism. In a few minutes, we are going to witness a very strange sight. A group of people will be asked a few questions and water will be poured over a child's head. That's all we will see. But, do we have any idea what is really going on? A mortal human being will become an immortal spiritual being. At a level we can barely imagine, a child named Peyton Cameron Lumia is going to change before our very eyes. He will receive the gift of eternal life.

And how is it going to happen? I have no idea. I just know it will. I don't understand a thing about electricity, either, but, I know that if I flip the switch on the wall, the light will come on. The power of electricity doesn't depend on me and the power of God depends even less, and if a thousand blind men could suddenly see or a million cripples get up and walk, that would be as nothing in comparison with what is going to happen here today.

But, again, did we get up this morning and come to church with a sense of anticipation and expectation? Familiarity can deaden our senses, but, so can something else - social freedom. Social freedom.

In our society, Baptism is too easy. That's right. Too easy. It doesn't cost us anything. But, in societies which are dominated by other religions or atheistic philosophies, Baptism is a risky business. When a person in such a society is baptized, they suffer immediate consequences. In some, they may never be allowed to buy or own property. They may never be allowed to work in a state-run industry. They may not attend public school. They may be subject to travel restrictions.

They may have freedom of religion in the sense that nobody forbids them from going to church, but, they may be denied medical care if they do. One has to wonder even how many Americans would be in church if it meant no more health insurance.

Baptism is taken very seriously in our world by those who are against it. But, why be against it? Because our world is a battlefield between spiritual forces.

Every time a person is baptized, God lays a claim on the life of that person and fills that person with spiritual gifts. Every time a person is baptized, they declare they believe in an eternal and objective Truth greater than anything man-made. Every time a person is baptized, they, indeed, become an enemy of the Devil and all his works.

Today is the Feast of All Saints', the day we celebrate the lives and witnesses of the baptized children of God who have gone before us to eternal life and glory with the Father. Today, we also celebrate the creation of a new saint. May he never be allowed to forget this day, and may we never become so accustomed to the miracles of God that we regard them with indifference.

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