

**All Saints Day: “Passing It On”
November 4, 2007
COJ and LIGHT
St. John’s Lutheran Church
Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger**

In less than five minutes, we have just heard two of the most powerful portions of scripture. The first, a 2000 year old letter from an apostle to the saints in Ephesus, filled with the poetry that has shaped so much of Christian worship and witness: “In Christ you also...were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” Indeed. And when marked with the seal of the Spirit in baptism, made a saint by grace, by God’s work, not our own. The apostle has heard of these ordinary saints’ faith and love toward others. And he prays that God will give them a spirit of wisdom, that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened. What imagery! And it is all meant to encourage and imbue those Ephesian saints with a total sense of God’s presence and promise to them in Christ.

And then, from these almost ethereal verses in Ephesians come the words of Jesus. Blessings! Woes. Admonitions and commands. Whenever I encounter Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, as it’s called in the Gospel of Luke, I always have this gut response. I think: yes, thank you, I need to know that I

am blessed amidst my grief. Yes, thank you, I need to know that those who are hungry and poor *are* blessed by God, that their hunger and poverty is seen by God for what it is: a consequence of *human* brokenness, greed, and sin. And I keep reading and then I think: yes, woe *is* me. For I'm not hungry. And next to the one billion people who live on less than a dollar a day, I sure am rich.¹ We all are. Those woes are also for us. They drive us to our need for God's grace. But wait, there's more. Jesus goes on. He brings it on! Love enemies, pray for abusers, give to everyone, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

And so what we have here today, in these two readings, is really the Gospel in miniature. We have the promise and presence of Christ and the challenge and call of Jesus. And as followers of Jesus the Christ, there can never be one without the other. Awash in God's grace, made saints by nothing other than the power of the Spirit at work in us, we are called to live into the way of Jesus. This way of Jesus proclaims blessing to those in pain, in grief, in want and need. This way of Jesus pronounces woe to those for whom riches and excess have become the end-all-be-all. This way of Jesus provokes us to respond to the sufferings and injustices of life with crazy compassion and

¹See www.one.org

steadfast love. This way of Jesus is *nearly impossible*. And yet, it is the path we are called to travel and the way with which we must wrestle. We are saints—we have *been made* saints—and now we are called to walk along the road Jesus keeps rolling out before us.

Throughout this Fall, we have been “Getting Connected,” and today we conclude the sermon series with this theme: “Passing It On.” And because it is All Saints Day, and because we have heard these texts, I want to remember those saints who have passed on faith, passion, and wisdom to us. Thankfully, there are scores of them. And we need them. We need those people for whom connection to God and God’s ways of reconciliation and transformation keep inspiring us. We need ordinary, everyday believers and trusters and seekers. We need their stories of ordinary, everyday believing, and trusting, and seeking. They’re our parents, friends, siblings, children, neighbors. Just think about the people in your life who have passed on faith and mission and passion to you: if you can, thank them!

We need extraordinary saints, too: the ones whose lives become known beyond their time and space because their witness to God’s presence in

Christ and their commitment to the ways of Jesus change people, communities, and the church itself. They're no more "saintly" than the rest of us, no more loved by God; they are not set above, closer to those "heavenly places." But, they are set apart. And we need to know their stories, too, so we can pass them on.

When I come across Jesus' admonition to "love your enemies," I think of one extraordinary saint, a 20th-century American prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. King's interpretation and practice of this command is the best and most powerful I've ever known. This was a man whose father changed both their names from Michael to Martin Luther after visiting the Reformation sites in Germany; a man whose trust in the power of God's grace and love for all people led our country down a road of racial reconciliation we're still traveling; a man who believed so fervently in the power of love that he was able to embrace Jesus' nearly impossible command. King talked a lot of about love and across the Baptist churches of the South and North he gave a lot of lessons in the Greek language. He talked about *eros*, romantic love. He talked about *philia*, the love of friendship. And then he talked about *agape*, the kind of love described most often in the New Testament, the kind of love that Jesus was always talking about when he said "Love one

Another” and “Love your enemies.” In 1957, at Dexter Ave. Baptist church in Montgomery, Alabama where he began his pastorate, King preached a sermon called “Loving Your Enemies,” and today I want to share a portion of it with you.²

“*Agape* ... is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love...And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them... And he might be the worst person you’ve ever seen.

And this is what Jesus means, I think, in this very passage when he says, "Love your enemy." And it's significant that he does not say, "Like your enemy." Like is a sentimental something, an affectionate something. There are a lot of people that I find it difficult to like. I don't like what they do to me. I don't like what they say about me and other people. I don't like their attitudes. I don't like some of the things they're doing. I don't like them. But Jesus says love them. And love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men, so that you love everybody, because God loves them...I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus' thinking, is this: that hate for hate

². See

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/sermons/571117.002_Loving_Your_Enemies.html for full text of this sermon

only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. [*tapping on pulpit*] It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate... Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love."

King believed that Christ was indeed promised and present for all. And King believed in and practiced the way of Jesus. To King, God was all about "redemptive goodwill." Loving enemies was the witness of the *strong* person. There's nothing sentimental or weak about this. It's the hard way!! But for King—and certainly for Jesus—it was the only way.

Don't you think that our world and our relationships could a little bit more "redemptive goodwill?"

And shouldn't we—the Saints of God—be leading the charge in *this* kind of love?

I hope that in these past weeks you have been able to “get connected” in a renewed way: to God, to the teachings of Jesus, to one another, to church, to mission, to yourself and your spiritual gifts, passions, and purpose. And I hope that you will take time to think about those who have passed on the faith to you. Know their stories so that you can pass them on. Know your own stories, saints of God, so that we can be about witness and mission! May we continue to receive a spirit of wisdom and that the eyes of our hearts be enlightened. Amen!