

## Sermons for the Journey

The Rev. Duncan A. Burns  
All Saints Day – Year A – 2017  
Sunday, November 5, 2017

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matt, 5:3-5).**

The word blessed in Greek is *makarios*, which means to be happy or blissful. It is an internal joy or peace that has nothing to do with external circumstances.

Several years ago, I visited the Diocese of Tanganyika in Tanzania. I met with the Bishop and the priests of the diocese to deal with a terrible famine that had occurred in their land. Bishop Roskam had worked with Bishop Mhogolo to offer a daily meal, school clothes, and an education to over 6000 children. But this year, there was little or no rainfall in the area.

The crops did not receive enough water to grow and there was a great shortage of food in the land. There was not enough food for my friends in our sister parish to feed their own children. The children of the parishioners were literally starving to death. We prayed together and we devised a strategy for our diocese in New York to directly assist their diocese with basic food staples, clean water, and continue to help provide secondary education for at risk children.

The next morning I traveled to the outskirts of the diocese in an area that was severely affected by the famine. It was obvious by the drawn faces and thinness of all the towns' people that there was not enough food and water.

The well where they draw their water was completely dry and the corn looked like parched brown stalks with no ears of corn on them. The land looked completely scorched with no green to be found for many miles. We provided a feast that the local ladies prepared which included a meat stew, spinach with groundnuts, bananas, and (of course) Fanta grape and orange soda. There was not a lot of food, but there was food for everyone. I cannot do justice to the celebration that followed the feast. Several young children sang in their native

tongue and danced in their traditional dress. They spoke of thanksgiving for the blessings in their lives and they danced and sang with a joy that I had never experienced. Their prayers had been answered, and we arranged to have basic staples sent to the village. Several members of our team were overwhelmed with tears on the long and bumpy ride back to our hotel. How could these people survive such a devastating famine and how could they be so thankful in the Lord? We could not believe the joy on the faces of the children and the gratitude of the adults for the program that we supported in their rural town.

We woke up the next morning in our four star hotel with a full English breakfast and we felt a little guilty that we were not as thankful for our lives and all the blessings that we take for granted every day. We live in a time of abundance in America. Shouldn't we be profoundly thankful for our shelter, food, education, and clean water that God provides for us? A child dies every 10 seconds from starvation in the world and 22,000 die from poverty each day.

We all need to exalt in the God of our salvation whether we are in good times or bad. When we hear the hunger pangs of children and the cry of the poor, we need to be thankful to God for our abundance and to share it with those in need. Let us praise the Lord this day, let us be thankful for what we have, and let us commit ourselves to help others in need in the coming year.

Happy are the poor in Spirit.

Happy are those who mourn.

Happy are the meek.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Happy are the pure in heart (Matt. 5:3-7).

In the chalice this week, I used a quote from Habakkuk. The passage talks about difficult external circumstances and hard times, but the focus is on God being our inner strength that helps us through the toughest of times. Each of us should yearn for this internal strength. In this day and age our world is so crazy that we need God's internal peace. Somebody drives a truck on the West Side, killing and injuring innocent people. The Las Vegas shooter fires into a crowd at a concert. Sometimes I think the world has gone mad with hate. But then I think of the faithful children of Africa that taught me a life changing lesson. Our joy comes from within in the love of God that gave his only begotten Son. Our external

circumstances are often out of our control. We need to remember that our lives are temporal and that God's Kingdom is eternal.

Today is All Saints Sunday when we join with saints and all the company of heaven. The Celts would call this Sunday a thin place when the temporal and eternal are very close. The faithful gather together to remember those whom we love, but see no longer. We especially remember those who touched our hearts and touched the hearts of others with the love of God. I invite you to light a candle in their honor after you have communion today.

There is no doubt that many saints have walked through the doors at St. John's. We remember them in our prayers and through the life and ministry that we live. Many of the programs that we support have been going on for decades. I believe that our loved ones look down at us with a smile when we are a blessing to others. We also thank the saints of the Christian Church – women and men whose witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ has been a blessing in every generation. We celebrate all who have been baptized in this church with the mark of the promised Holy Spirit and all those who have served here. We celebrate all their lives and their generosity that allows our generation to praise and worship our Lord in this beautiful church.

Mother Teresa said that we all can't do great things, but we can do small things with great love. It is through our ordinary acts of love that brings the Kingdom of Heaven closer to Earth. St Paul tells us in Hebrews 12:1 that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. Saints are faithful men and women who have lived their lives for the sake of others. Paul asks us to persevere, so that after we have done God's will, we will receive what God has promised.

In the next few weeks we will help battered women with Thanksgiving baskets, people whose lives were devastated by the recent hurricanes, children in the hospital with unwrapped presents, poor children with shoeboxes, and we will pledge to support this church so that our ministry can be passed to another generation. We are connected to one another by the love of Christ. We are connected to so many saints, so much faith and to so much divine love. So, today let us remember all the deeply faithful saints of God's church through whom the glory of God has been revealed, is being revealed, and will be revealed.

Today we also celebrate Loyalty Sunday. Stewardship should be a joyful celebration of giving back to God what God has already given us. This year's theme is Journey to Generosity. "God's initiative is always to bless, and that blessing is never earned, it is freely given." I ask you to consider giving proportionally to the blessings you have received. When we give sacrificially, our internal compass lines up with the will of God and we feel both grace and joy. We follow in the path of the saints before us at St. John's that are now smiling from above. Through our commitment to proportional giving, we offer a pledge of thanksgiving for all we have received and for all we will become as we grow into the image of Christ.

Give of your time, talent and treasure to God, because you truly believe that Christ died that you might have abundant life. When a heart is filled with the love of God, the desire to give a portion back comes from deep within, not from a rational sense of obligation. We use the gifts that God has given us to do the work God is calling us to do. God will never ask you to do anything unless God provides the means for you to do it. Give from your heart and St. John's will serve this community with generosity as we have for the past 272 years. Please give joyfully and graciously from your heart. God is well pleased when we give in this manner and will provide everything we need to do the work that God calls us to do. On this day I remember the children in Tanzania that changed my life. As we remember those who have gone before us, please think of all the smiles and joy of the children that will benefit from your generosity. **Amen.**