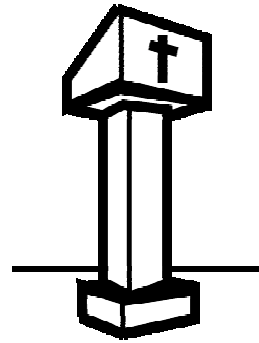


All Saints' Sunday

Sermon Preached on November 6, 2011
By Wendy D. Cliff at Saint John's



[Revelation 7:9-17](#)

[Psalm 34:1-10, 22](#)

[1 John 3:1-3](#)

[Matthew 5:1-12](#)

November 1st is the date we celebrate as All Saints in church today. This past Tuesday, November 1st, I was at the breakfast table reading the paper, when my 15-year-old son was leaving for school. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt, actually tucked into his khaki pants, and wearing a tie. My husband walked in and said, "Wow, Mac you look nice. What's up?" My son told him it was a liturgy dress day at his Catholic high school. "Why?" asked Butch. Mac said, "It's All Saints." To which my jokester husband said, "How many saints?" Mac said, "All saints." Then Butch proceeded to tease Mac as he was walking out of the room, saying "Wait, how many? Did you say, many?" "No, Dad, all." "What? Some saints?" "No Dad." As the front door was closing, Butch was still calling out "I can't hear you, Mac. Did you say one saint?"

I smiled and continued reading my paper: UNESCO granted membership to Palestine, in famine-ravaged Somalia mothers are having to choose which children to save and which to leave behind, and the worst floods in Thailand's history are devastating the country. Amongst those stories of turmoil and tragedy, I saw this headline from an Associated Press article about the world population: "United Nations Marks 7 Billionth Baby [Born]; 8 Billion Expected by 2025."¹ 7 billion people!! Can you even fathom that many people?

How many saints? All saints.

In discussing the population statistics, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the [7 billionth milestone] was "not about one newborn or even one generation" but "about our entire human family." Our entire human family. Could this be what we hear about in today's reading from Revelation, that "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"? Could this also be what we're referring to in the Apostle's Creed, our baptismal creed, when we say that line about the communion of saints? What do we really believe about the communion of saints?

¹ John Gambrell, Associated Press, "United Nations Marks 7 Billionth Baby; 8 Billion Expected by 2025" *Marin Independent Journal*, Tuesday, November 1, 2011, p. A9.

I love the double meaning in that phrase: communion of saints. It encompasses both the idea of an infinite group of faithful people from all ages, as well as the action of those faithful people celebrating the Eucharist. And those two concepts, of a group and an action, happen at the same time. As we celebrate communion, we do so with all those who have done the same in the past, starting with Jesus, and up through the ages, including those who are not yet born. It's the biggest circle you can imagine, but the circle isn't closed because it's always adding people. Forget about this week's UN population statistics, imagining the size of the communion of saints should really blow our minds!

How many saints? All saints.

Well, how about some smaller numbers? Did you know there are almost 9 _ million children just in California?² According to the Children's Defense Fund, almost 2 million of them live in poverty. Over three-quarters of fourth and eighth graders are unable to read at grade level and their math scores are comparably dismal. Over 100,000 students will drop out of high school each year. This is just in the state of California.

My research revealed that these statistics don't necessarily match the Diablo Unified School District test results. I live in Marin County and those statistics don't match our test results either. At least, not until we look a little bit closer. Sure, our school districts rank among the highest in the state, but is every single student reading at grade level? Is every child coming to school with a full stomach from breakfast and a healthy meal packed for lunch? Is every student manifesting their God-given gifts? You know the answer to that. No. It's what I call in Marin the "dirty little secret" because there are children all over my county who can't read, solve simple math problems, are eating junk food while wincing in pain from untreated cavities, or are ducking in front of their bedroom windows to avoid stray bullets. People move to communities like ours specifically for the schools, the bucolic settings, and the safe neighborhoods. But is everyone living that dream?

In the education circles in Marin county, we call it the achievement gap. Projects like the Hannah Freedom School work to address that achievement gap by gathering people from all sectors of the community: churches, businesses, schools, health care providers, and civic organizations to work collaboratively to serve children and bridge these gaps.

What gaps are there in Clayton and Contra Costa County? How might those gaps be bridged? Today's Beatitudes are one way Jesus invites us to imagine how we might bridge those gaps.

Will you please open your bulletin and find today's gospel reading? Starting at the first beatitude, I'd like you to read it aloud and then I'm going to pose a question after each one. No need to answer, just quietly wonder. These are the sorts of questions the Marin City community leaders asked when we were planning the Freedom School, but

² Children's Defense Fund, "Children in California Fact Sheet." <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/state-data-repository/cits/2011/children-in-the-states-2011-california.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2011).

many of the questions might be broad enough to also apply here in this parish or in the surrounding community.

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

How can we help children and families learn about their ancestors and feel proud of their particular cultural heritage?

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

How can I shine a light into the broken hearts of children who have been told they are worthless?



Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

How can we redirect anger and pain into productive outlets that nurture children and benefit society?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

How can I empower youth to be leaders and voice their opinions about social issues?

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

How can we pave the way for someone to make a fresh start and get into college even though they messed up along the way?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

I see children with parents or relatives in prison; how can I help those children see a different option for their futures?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

What skills can we teach children so they can resolve conflicts non-violently?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Where can I join with others who are working to stop the cycle of poverty and violence in our area so everyone can live in safety and peace?

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Are we courageous enough to risk looking at and naming the gaps and injustices in our communities and then challenge the status quo, all in order to serve those without voices?

And the last one:

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The radical truth of what Jesus was teaching, first up on that mountain, and then throughout his entire life, death and resurrection, was that until everyone, yes everyone, has been blessed with love, peace, justice, mercy, safety, and basic material necessities, we can't fully rejoice and be glad with the prophets and saints who went before us.

As we celebrate the communion of saints today, remembering all those who went before us, welcoming the newly baptized, renewing our baptismal promises, and giving thanks to God for our faith community's gathering, we also notice who isn't in this circle. We listen for the voice that isn't singing with us, or the hands that aren't being filled with life-giving bread, and we pray for guidance on how to share our joy with them, too.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said a population of seven billion "is a challenge," and "at the same time, an opportunity, depending upon how the international community prepares for that challenge."³

We are preparing for that challenge today. When Jim is baptized and we reaffirm our baptismal covenant, our faith has called us to commit to "seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as ourselves" And, "striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being." With God's help, and by praying and working together, we are ready to meet that challenge of a bigger world.

Now, remember how my son had left for school this past Tuesday morning and didn't hear Butch's last All Saints question? Let's see if, way over in Marin, Butch can hear the correct response when I ask you, "How many saints?" "All saints!"

³ John Gambrell, Associated Press, "United Nations Marks 7 Billionth Baby; 8 Billion Expected by 2025" *Marin Independent Journal*, Tuesday, November 1, 2011, p. A9.