

JACOB'S PROMISE

A SERMON PREACHED ON THE OBSERVANCE OF ALL SAINT'S DAY, OCTOBER 31, 2004

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Appointed gospel text for All Saint's Day:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"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.

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

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

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

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

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-12

*"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God."*

Well, it's Halloween. As one social commentator put it, "This is the season when undead horror-movie franchises rise from the grave." To which I would add, when an almost-full autumn moon further unnerves a skittish and anxious American electorate. And personally, as if the real world wasn't spooky enough, my neighbor who's been decorating their house for weeks now has an eight foot inflatable black widow spider hanging off the roof of their garage, ready to greet costumed children scurrying about the neighborhood tonight.

So the burning question on everyone's mind? Who you gonna be for Halloween? Everyone's decided what you'll be right? Who you gonna be?

On Thursday, Germaine's boss ordered everyone to come to work Friday in costume for a party and prizes. So I loaned her my old Fr. Cowboy outfit. For those of you too young to remember, the talented Buckaroos and lovely Buckettes used to join me in performing and singing silly country-western / religious tunes (all brought to you by the fictitious Alter-Egos, Inc: "for those who think they can only be somebody by being somebody else...").

Germaine looked pretty cute in my black cowboy shirt with the white fringe, and the black Stetson with a rhinestone cross emblazoned on the front of it. But the costume contest winner was a female co-worker who showed up dressed in a prisoner outfit, wearing a kitchen apron ... You guessed it: She was Martha Stewart!

Today is the day everybody gets to be somebody else, or something else. One survey last week revealed 36% of the American public says you're never too old to dress up as somebody else and go trick-or-treat; which – in and of itself – is a little scary two days before a hotly-contested presidential election.

One online costume vendor reported George Bush masks were outselling John Kerry masks 54%-46%. Make of that what you will, but a lot of people have been trying to figure out who's behind those two masks for months ... Trick or treat?

Spiderman, as it turns out, is this year's top selling mask. Just consider: here we have a fantasy comic book action hero, bigger than life and superhuman, willing to forego personal love and happiness for the sake of saving humanity from the clutches of evildoers. Sounds a little messianic to me.

Meanwhile, in the Church, today is All Hallows Eve, the eve of All Saints Day. It's our annual observance when we commemorate (*com-memorate, remember with*) the lives of those who have died in the faith with the living faith of which we are still and always a part; affirming that the "narrow stream of death" we just sang about in our gradual hymn cannot separate us from the love of God, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

It's a day to celebrate *all* the saints. There are the *extraordinary* saints; the holy, revered and often-martyred examples of Christian faith, certainly more real than Spiderman. And then there are the *ordinary* saints and believers, like you and me.

So I ask you, if you were going to go trick-or-treating as a *saint* this Halloween, who would you choose to be? St. Matthew or Mark? Maybe Thomas, or Mary, or the other Mary? How 'bout someone a little more exotic, like St. Germaine or Hildegard? Or at least more obscure, like Polycarp, or one of my favorites Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky.

Me? I'd probably go as St. John. Not the Baptist, but the fourth evangelist, after whom our parish is named. It's a natural for me. For years I've habitually answered the office phone, "Hello, Saint John's, John speaking!" I can be both *extraordinary* & *ordinary* at the same time, all the time.

Again, if we had an All Saints Party, and you had to come disguised as a saint, who would you be? It's not so much a matter of which saint you'd *look* like – since we don't have any recognizable idea in most cases. Rather, whom would you try to act like? Which saint might you try to emulate, and how?

It is with all this in mind that I thought to myself, maybe this year for Halloween, perhaps we *should* have an All Saint's party. Then I realized, every Sunday is a party for all the saints! And, in that case, maybe we should celebrate All Hallows Eve encouraging everyone to take your pick who you will be based on how you will act, not who you'll look like. And, in that case, what if we all came not just as a saint, but as a *beatitude*. Yeah, you know, as in "*blessed are ...*" Consider: What if you were a "*blessed are*" for Halloween? Which one would you be?

... maybe we should celebrate All Hallows Eve encouraging everyone to take your pick who you will be based on how you'll act, not who you'll look like. ... what if we all came not just as a saint, but as a beatitude ... Consider: What if you were a "blessed are" for Halloween? Which one would you be?

You could come as one who is poor in spirit, and find here the kingdom of heaven here.

You could come as one who is mourning, and here you would find comfort.

You could come cloaked in meekness and humility; and find a goodly inheritance, with no tricks, only treats.

You could come with a hunger and a hankering for what is right, and find it.

You could come with your arms full of mercy, and leave with more than you came.

You could come with an open heart, and find the heart of God revealed behind these open doors.

Or, you could come as a peacemaker, and God would readily see no disguise, but rather recognize you as one of God's own.

I thought to myself – of all these possibilities this year – if I were to come to our Halloween party as a *beatitude*, I'd pick this last one. Especially this year. I'd come as a peacemaker, and child of God.

But wait. I *am* a child of God! Then, what does that look like? More so, how does one act?

When Christian evangelical pastor and political hack, Pat Robertson, counseled President Bush before invading Iraq, he says he warned him it'd be a "messy disaster," "full of casualties." But did he tell him to go dressed as a warrior or peacemaker? And, would we, in turn, be blessed for it as children of God?

When oft-quoted Christian leader, Jerry Falwell said last Sunday on CNN, "But you've got to kill the terrorists before the killing stops. And I'm for the president to chase them all over the world. If it takes ten years, blow them all away in the name of the Lord," I wonder, which beatitude did Brother Jerry have in mind?

When born-again Christian, George W. Bush borrows from our holy scriptures to portray a vision of America's destiny and his foreign policy, is that really what our Lord was referring to when Jesus spoke of a bright, "shining city on a hill?"

Last Saturday, in his diocesan convention address, our own Bishop Swing observed:

"Today we come together as part of the witness of Jesus' death & resurrection ... who live into the world's crucifixion pain, and who leap to embrace the joy of resurrection in our midst. We are a different people. For us, collateral damage isn't an incidental; it is the primary soil we till. For us, enemies are not targets for extinction; they are people who will inevitably, some day, be our neighbors. The one we cheer most enduringly is the Prince of Peace."

On the observance of All Saint's Day, in *our* Christian tradition we always read from those teachings of Jesus, known as the beatitudes. We read either Matthew's version from that section of his gospel known as the *Sermon on the Mount*, as we have done this year. Or we read alternatively from Luke's version, known as the *Sermon on the Plain*. Luke's version of the beatitudes includes not only "blessings," but "curses" as well; those are the flip-side consequences when we choose not to be a beatitude of God. As it turns out, Luke's extended version is probably more apt, and a more recognizable beatitude this year.

And all in the crowd were trying to touch Jesus, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. "

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also ... Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:19-31)

"Blessed are the those who love their enemies?" What does it mean to embody such a beatitude of Christ in a world of violence? Serious Christians ask how shall we truly and faithfully live in a world of violence, without resigning ourselves to an endless future of pre-emptive wars?

Does it require us to somehow disguise the consequences of massive civilian casualties, such as when the Secretary of Defense masks Coalition Forces' pin-point bombing raids as an example of how "impressively humane" we are (Donald Rumsfeld's words) in the business of war-making? Shall we re-write the beatitudes of our Lord in order to reflect instead the double curse of fear and retaliation; rather than a hunger for humility, compassion and charity?

When we view our military actions and foreign policy as pure, and virtuous, and without error of judgment — while our adversaries are regarded as nothing but vicious evildoers beyond reach or reproach — how do we then presume to wear even the *mask* of the peacemaker, let alone obediently follow Christ's command to love our enemies?

For the sake of the living, and the departed, and for Christ's sake, isn't it time Christians actually reclaim the teachings of our Lord, and those *blessings* of our life in Christ; rather than the curses that continue to befall us?

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In a few moments, we will baptize a young friend, twelve year old Jacob Harris. Jacob has served beside me at the altar as an acolyte since shortly after showing up at St. John's a couple years ago; along with his mother and grandfather. His mother told me a few weeks ago she thought it'd be a good idea to get Jacob baptized. I agreed!

In a few moments, Jacob will make a promise, as we renew our own baptismal promises right alongside him. I will ask,

"Will you seek & serve Christ in all people, loving your neighbor as yourself?"

"I will, with God's help."

"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

"I will, with God's help."



Jacob's promise is our promise as well, of course. And our life. Our life in Christ and the *beatitudes* of God.

In recent years I've asked parish members to reflect annually on a memorable moment they personally experienced at Saint John's, that we might *com*-memorate it together. Just this morning I received one such written reflection from parishioner Gary Carr:

A memory I will carry with me was of the Vigil in honor of the first 1,000 U.S. troops who had died in Iraq up to that time. ... the silent church at dusk, the candles, the people assembled to remember and mourn, the slow and deliberate reading of the names, the tolling of the bell, the striking of the names from the list – linked us all, living and dead, in our humanity and common purpose.

We were all, in that moment, God's children, the fruit of God's love. The ritual provided a quiet stopping-place from which we could look into our hearts. We could share the pain that God must feel for even the least of his children who suffer. It gave us the chance to realize, once more, that "no one is an island," that we are responsible for each other, and that none of us is alone.

Who you gonna be for Halloween? Better, who you gonna be *behind* the mask? How 'bout a saint, among all the saints of God? Better yet, how 'bout a beatitude, a peacemaker, and child of God?

Amen. *jb+*

Who you gonna be for Halloween? How 'bout a saint, ... a beatitude, a peacemaker, and child of God?



Whether Jumper, Piglet or Squirrel, Kitty or Cat-in-the-Hat, Katy the Lionhearted or Lady in Waiting, Ghoul or Buzz Lightspeed, every costume won a prize in this year's contest at Saint John's!