November 2, 2014 The Feast of All Saints

All Saints’ Church Year A

Revelation John 7:9-17 Psalm 34:1-10,22

First Letter of John 3:1-3 Matthew 5:1-12

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. We are in the presences of men, women and children who have gone before us in faith: All of the saints, by their words and actions, bestow on us the knowledge that life never ends, but only changes. The world can throw us goblin masks, scary screeches, walking skeletons- we can scoff. And those other things life can throw us? Cancer, suicide, addictions, accidents, hunger, poverty, and fear, we can face them, never alone; held by the “communion of saints,” we are not afraid.

Saints remind us: Life never ends, but only changes, and today we honor all Saints. The saints are present, here in our midst, praying for us, supporting us, urging us on, as we, just as they did, run the race that has been set before us.

And here is the great secret: By the virtue of our baptism, we too are Saints. Saints Alive!

We are loved, redeemed, and lifted up as beautiful.

By the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s indwelling is with us. Think of this gift as a verb: Jesus Easters within us. (reference to Gerald Manley Hopkins, “The Wreck of the Deutschland).

This eastering is present in the Eucharist, in Communion, in the Body of Christ, but it is also present in us, in this community. We are Saints because, together, in communion, we are the Body of Christ. Jesus Easters within, always present, always forming us as individuals and as a community to be who God surprises us into being.

This gift of the Holy Spirit is manifested by a healing touch, by the spaciousness of forgiveness and by hope. When we cross ourselves, either as we enter into church, or as the crucifer goes by, or as we end our prayers, we are crossing not only the presence of God within this sacred space, but also the presence of God within us, within each and every one of us. Jesus eastering within.

As Bishop Irenaeus reminds us, a saint from the second century, “The Glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

We claim this truth with confidence. We are fully alive and we manifest the glory of God. **THIS IS CHURCH.**

And maybe one of the best kept secret of all times.

Our challenge and opportunity is to tell the Story, to uncover, to reveal and to liberate this amazing story. What is the story? I think it comes down to one thing:

God is Madly in Love with us. Absolutely committed, engaged, present, giddy with joy, betrothed to us in immediacy and in presence. GOD IS PASSIONATELY ENGAGED, loving us deeply and intimately.

Today, I would like to share with you, at least in part, the beginning of a developing vision, and why I am so thrilled and blessed to be here as your Rector.

I believe that part of God’s dream for us is to tell this Story. We are poised to be able to do this very well. We have been gifted with a beautiful church, with resources, with health, with passion, and with a community that wants to make a difference. We are Saints’ Alive.

How do we begin?

We need to find a way to translate our Love Story to those who are living bonded to the Secular Society and who are formed by it. Most often referred to as the “unchurched,” I would like to suggest that “uniformed” is a better adjective.

My experience tells me that people, who are not part of the church, think they know church. They know it and they have rejected it. When asked, this is what they say:

Church is full of pious people who are judgmental and demanding. They believe in a God who is vengeful, exacting, severe and moralistic, with an authority that reigns on the lost sheep and relegates those who do not speak the right religion to the outer realms, scattered beyond the Gates of Paradise, closed off from salvation and eternal life, forever. And as for the religious leaders, they abuse their God-given authority as the trump card to advance their own political and societal vision.

How often, have I said, “no, no, you have it wrong. That’s not church, far from it.” That approach doesn’t work. All my enthusiasm has fallen on deaf ears.

The only way I have entered into this world of the “uniformed”, really entered in, is when I have said, “I am so sorry that this has been your experience… tell me more.” And I have listened. And I have listened, and listened, more and more. And then I have said, “I am so sorry. It’s our fault that this is your experience. May I apologize in the name of the church for all that you have suffered. Tell me, how you have found your way to live within your mind and heart and spirit?

And the conversation begins, in earnest. And it doesn’t take long to get to the hope and to the pain, to the loneliness, and the fear and the passion. The world is hurting; people are in great need. They want to matter, yet they worry that their quests in life are played out on a stage that is indifferent to their efforts and soulless in its character.

Here are some of their cries:

Many people believe, because they have been told, that everything is possible, and that all is allowed- it’s up to them to figure it out. This is translated as freedom. There is just one caveat: nothing is forgiven. Expectations are high, yet there is so much fear- mistakes will be made, yet there is no room for mistakes. Social Darwinism reigns. This translates as pressure; many are being crushed by it.

With no forgiveness, there are few internal reserves; it’s difficult to identify resiliency or to enjoy the life of the mind, so worried so many are about whether or not they will find a job and make it in a world that is cold and heartless. It’s difficult for them to identify their sense of self that is not limited to their successes and their failures. Time is the enemy, as if time actually exists. The feel victimized by Time, measured in sound bites. And there will never be enough of anything. It’s a loveless world.

So often people tell me that they are spiritual, not religious. When I ask what they mean, responses always point to the importance of finding meaning, purpose, hope and trust. They find some kind of limitation if life is centered only on nurturing one’s ego. There should be more, something outside of themselves, something or someway to help them connect with the mystery and power of life. They begin to talk about capacity rather than capabilities or spaciousness rather than successes, or gratefulness rather than greatness. They want to engage with their integrity, rather than feel a need to exaggerate or prove their worthiness. They want to feel whole, to be open to possibility, to seeing in truthful ways, to making a difference, to risk and to love.

Ok, do we not see a match? A perfect match. We need to seize the day. We need each other. We are each other.

Where/How do we begin to find each other? This should not be like searching for Waldo. We need to be more than a welcoming church; we need to be an inviting church. We need to invite, and we need to listen, and listen, and listen and to hear and carry the pain and the hope. I have lots of ideas and I am eager to brainstorm with you about all the ways we can do this, but let’s first remember this:

You are saints. Jesus is eastering within you. And you take that experience with you in all that you do, in your work, in your hobbies, in your studies, with your friends, with your family, with store clerks and town clerks, with teachers, lawyers, bankers, doctors, administrators, with all whom you have contact. You are the Living Word. You are the gospel that needs no words.

I have a vivid memory of when I first felt this idea of Jesus “eastering” within. I didn’t have words for it, but my heart was burning.

Every summer, when I was young, my mother and my three siblings and I would spend July and August with my mother’s mother, Nana, in San Rafael, CA. We had one car, and we usually took Nana to her car pool just outside the Golden Gate Bridge so that she could travel with her colleagues to her work in the city. But often, at least once a week, we would pile into the back seat and take Nana into San Francisco, drop her off at work, and spend the whole day in that beautiful city. The earliest memory I have of crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, Nana was directing my mother, who was driving, to the “right” toll lane. It was the longest, and as young as I was, I knew that was strange. Cars were passing us, and not because they had an Eazy Pass and we didn’t. We were in line, and patient. This was intentional. Others were also choosing this lane. Strange. As we came to the booth, Nana said, “Roy, these are my grandchildren.”

“Oh, Fay, they are so beautiful. Where’s Jamie, the oldest?” I raised my hand. His smile was so white.

“So happy to meet you and your sisters and your brother. And, Fay, this must be your daughter, Frankie. What a fine mother you have, Frankie.”

“How’s your daughter, Roy?” Nana asked.

“Oh, so much better, Fay, thank you for your prayers.”

And then we moved on. I turned around- days before seatbelts, and rested my chin against the back window and watched the tollbooth until it was out of sight.

To this day, I can still recall how full I felt. My heart was burning. I didn’t have words for it, but I had witnessed the Christ. Roy had transformed his tollbooth into Divine Love. Others knew it. Nana knew it, and now I knew it.

Yes, we are but of dust and ash, and yet we are so much more. We are Jesus eastering within. We have a story to tell about love and purpose and meaning and grace. We are a salve to a broken world.

We are Saints’ Alive.