

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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In his poem *Ulysses*, Alfred Tennyson wrote “I’m a part of all that I’ve met.” That has always been one of my favorite lines of poetry and it’s one that grabs hold of me with extra strength each year as we celebrate All Saints Sunday.

This is one of the heaviest days in our church calendar, a day where we look back at the past year and remember all who have passed away, all the hands we wish we could still hold and the conversations we wish we could still have. Among this heaviness, this day also gives us an opportunity to remember each person in all their wonderful particularities, perhaps to remember the way they’d laugh, or the way they’d smell, or the way they made you feel when you spent time with them. This day gives us an opportunity to reflect on all the ways that each and every one of our dearly departed saints has shaped us, how they continue to live on in all the little ways—like the way we take our coffee or the music we now listen to because they recommended it—and in the big ways, like the very way we see the world around us. This day gives us an opportunity to remember that we are a part of all that we’ve met, of all the loved ones we remember now.

But I also think this quote needs to be edited a little bit. On the one hand, it makes me think of my grandfather Pop-Pop, about how my competitive nature is in no small part due to the hours he spent happily crushing me in chess. But it also makes me think of my other grandfather, Robert, who I never got the opportunity to meet. Robert was also a pastor, and the older I’ve gotten the more I’ve wondered how much my life path has been shaped

by him, if I ever would have even thought to become a pastor, if it wasn't for the way he shaped my father, and then my father shaped me. Perhaps the poem should read "I'm a part of all that I've met... and all the people they've met... and all the people they've met..." and so on. It doesn't have quite the same ring to it, and yet I think it captures what is so powerful about celebrating All Saints Sunday: it reminds us that, whether or not we've met them personally, we only know who we are *because* of the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, because of the world they have created for us. It reminds us how much we need each other throughout time and space.

This makes today's Gospel reading especially fitting, because in it, Jesus is also reminding us of how deeply we need one another.

Right away, we hear Jesus say "Blessed are you who are poor." In ancient Greek, there are multiple different words that could be used to describe poverty. The word Jesus uses here is *ptochos* which comes from the Greek "*ptosso*," literally meaning "to crouch." *Ptochos* refers to a level of poverty that forces someone to crouch down, to beg for money. It's not referring to a type of poverty that can be hidden, a type of poverty that is difficult but can ultimately be handled on one's own. Someone who is *ptochos* is so poor they have no option but to beg for their money. Someone who is *ptochos* knows that they have no hope of providing for themselves. Someone who is *ptochos* is exactly who the powers that be tell us to look down on, to judge, to ignore. But into this harsh reality, Jesus says "Blessed are you who are *ptochos*." Blessed are you who have no option but to rely on others. Blessed are you who must look to others for help. Blessed are you who know you need other people.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. After proclaiming a series of four "blessed are yous" he goes on to share four corresponding "woe to yous." Now pairing the blessings and the woes together may make it feel like Jesus is cursing people, but the Greek word for woe—*ouai*—could also be translated as "alas." Jesus is not cursing, but exclaiming his grief, making a statement of pity, meant to get people's attention and warn them of the distress that is coming their way, not in some distant future, but here and now. Jesus is exclaiming "Alas, you who are rich, alas you who are full, alas you who are laughing." Alas – you seem to have it all and yet, within the new ethics of God's reign, a reign that completely overturns our worldly values, you are missing something utterly essential, something you are incomplete without. When you are rich, when you are full, when you are laughing, it is easy to believe that you can do it all on your own. When you are rich, when you are full, when you are laughing, it is easy to believe you do not need God and other people.

In a world where SNAP benefits are at risk, in a world where people are told to "work harder" and "pull themselves up by their bootstraps," in a world where poverty is treated as a personal failing instead of a systemic unwillingness to care for community, Jesus' words here are utterly radical. Jesus is saying "to those of you who believe you are self-made, to those of you who believe you have enough on your own, to those of you who believe you don't need anyone or owe anyone anything – alas! For you are missing that which is absolutely essential to God's kingdom! Alas, because though you may think yourself blessed, you have cut yourself off from the joy of community, of mutuality, of interdependence, you have cut yourself off from the joy that comes from living together as God calls us to. But to those of you who know you cannot possibly make it on your own, to those of you who

know you need others, to those of you who know you belong to one another, blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom of God.”

On All Saints Sunday we celebrate a Christ who inverts all our worldly expectations, who tears apart the myth of independence and who proclaims the mutuality of the kingdom of God. We celebrate that God created us to be in community with one another and with all the saints throughout the ages, that Christ says “blessed are you” when we recognize how much we need one another and cries out in dismay when we turn away from one another. And we celebrate that each and every one of us has been invited into the communion of saints, not because we are perfect, or rich, or self-made, but because God freely loves us exactly as we are, in all our wonderful particularities.

In a world that promotes self-sufficiency, that tells us we are supposed to need nothing and no one, Jesus proclaims a different truth in our Gospel today: that we need God and one another deeply. That, in our need, God meets us with a grace that never fails, and then challenges us to meet one another with that same grace.

Soon, we will ring the bells and read the names of all our beloved saints who have died. And as we do so, we get to reflect on how each and every person whose name is read is a beloved child of God, someone who was not perfect but was deeply loved, someone whose existence shaped ours in ways both known and unknown. Into our mourning, we hear a profound word of comfort from Jesus: “blessed are you who weep, for you will laugh.”

This promise of laughter is the promise of community, the promise that love doesn't disappear, but continues to ripple outward, shaping the world long after we are gone. We will weep, yes, and we will laugh when we see glimpses of our loved ones appear in the world around us: in the appearance

of their favorite bird outside our window, in the smell of their favorite recipe, in a grandchild's grin that looks just like theirs. We will weep, yes, and we will laugh when we realize that the saints who have gone before us are still shaping the world through us, that their care, their courage, their imperfect faith still echoes in the lives we lead today.

Soon, we will also read the names of all those who have been baptized this year. And as we do so, we remember that God's reign is still unfolding, that the communion of saints is not simply a memory, but an ever-growing reality, that God continues to invite us in, to need and be needed by one another throughout time and space. The same Spirit that bound our ancestors in faith now binds those whose baptisms we honor today. The same Spirit that guided those who came before us continues to guide us today and will one day guide those who come after. The same Spirit that enabled our ancestors to imperfectly answer Jesus' call in this Gospel—to try to love their enemies, to try to bless those who cursed them, to try to do unto others as they would have done—that same Spirit now grants us the same grace, so that we might teach those who will come after us.

All Saints Sunday reminds us that none of us stand alone, not in life, not in death. Jesus reminds us in our Gospel lesson that independence is not what God wants for us. We are bound to one another, across generations and distances, by the love of a God who refuses to let us go. We are bound to one another, bound to put down our false sense of self-sufficiency and acknowledge how desperately we need each other and God. We are bound to one another by a great web of grace that stretches across time and space, that links the past to the future, brings together the living and the dead, and gives us glimpses of the Kingdom of God on earth.

So perhaps, let me make one last edit to Tennyson's poem. As we ring the bells and name our beloved saints and welcome the newly baptized into this great cloud of witnesses, let us remember: we are a part of all that we've met, and all that they've met.

And we are also a part of all that God has yet to reveal.

Amen.