

Chapters in a Shared Story
Celebration of Ministries Sunday, September 25, 2022, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

*Gracious God, last night I saw a blessing pass me by, on its way to a stranger.
 I did not know who was to be blessed or why,
 but I could feel the warmth of the kindness intended.
 We live in a world of faces, most we never see, who are hidden chapters in a story we all share.
 There is no human who has ever lived, or will live, to whom we are not related.
 God's kinship is a bond of blessing between us and all who breathe.
 We are those we know as well as those we fear.
 We are the other to ourselves,
 and self in every soul we see.
 Be present with us this morning as we offer our prayers and praises to you, in the name of
 Jesus, our Savior, and your Holy Spirit, our Comforter. Amen!*

+

Good morning All Saints!
 It is SO good to be here.
 It is SO good to be here together.

I am grateful for my time away.
 It was truly sabbath.
 Truly rest.

People asked me before what my sabbatical project was going to be. Was I going to travel or write a book or what was I going to do. And I would say "I am going to rest." And that's what I did. I rested. And it was wonderful.

Sabbatical was a reminder that when we say "God dwells in you" ... when we speak of being made in the image of God ... it is a profound and yet increasingly aspirational statement of holiness of being and purpose.

We live in a world that says we are what we produce. But every time we say "God dwells in you," it is a reminder that we are more than what we produce.

We live in a world that says we are what we own. But every time we say, "God dwells in you," it is a reminder that we are more than what we acquire.

A reminder that each of us is unique and beautiful and infinitely precious not for what we do or what we have ... but just by being who we are.

It was an incredible thing being apart from All Saints Church and yet somehow not feeling apart from you.

I was away from all the details and challenges and finances and personnel issues and the complexities of moving a legacy institution through change ... putting all those things far from my mind and trusting that they were being lovingly tended by incredible staff and vestry ... particularly Sally Howard who stepped in as acting rector and Julianne Hines and Rise Worthy Deamer who have been beyond amazing as your wardens.

In fact, ... can we just take a moment and express our gratitude to them for the tremendous work they did over the past four months.

It was an incredible thing being apart from All Saints Church ... and yet in a profound way not being apart from you at all.

And that has a lot to do with prayer.

Now prayer has taken different forms at different times of my life. I've come to learn there is no one right way to pray, as long as I'm being intentional about being in God's presence.

I'm not sure when I became a pray-er. Only that over time I discovered that while prayer doesn't function as some sort of divine ATM dispensing God's power in the forms and denominations I choose ... prayer is a powerful tool of relationship.

I've found that prayer deepens my relationship with God because in prayer I can pour my heart out to God ... not expecting that God is there to do my bidding but letting God hear and feel my deepest desires and fears, joys and griefs, angers and exhaustions.

And prayer also deepens my relationship with people. Because when I pray for someone, it grounds me in the truth that that person is a unique and beautiful image of God.

As I ask God to bless them, to heal them, to surround them with love and even to love them through me ... my love for them awakens or grows even just a little bit ... and then a little bit more ... and then a little bit more – and just as important, I become just a little bit more open to receiving love from them.

I have discovered that not only is it impossible for me to hate someone I pray for regularly, it is actually impossible for me not to grow in compassion for them. Not to begin to love them even in incredibly imperfect ways.

When we were first separated ... when COVID drove us physically apart two and a half years ago, and sensing that we were entering a time that would need intense prayer, I realized I needed to get more structured about my prayer life .. so I started a prayer list that was the most detailed I had ever made.

It had categories and subheadings.

People who had COVID

People who had recovered from it.

People who were sick from other illnesses.

Staff

Vestry

Leaders in the community, nation and world.

Activists

Colleagues

Family members

A catch-all for people who just needed prayer or who I just needed to be connected in prayer with.

I had a category for people I was in conflict with or who I knew were angry with me – I gotta tell you, as you pray, I can't recommend enough finding a way to pray for people with whom you are in conflict. I have found it to be a game-changer in infusing my own self-righteousness with even a little bit of compassion.

I would add people, shift them from one category to another ... take them off.

All except one category ... people who had died. I never took anyone off that list.

And through the pandemic it just grew and grew and grew.

It became not just a litany of remembrance. It's hard to describe, but it became a living reminder that we are connected in ways that are more powerful even than death.

As I prayed those names every morning, sometimes I would feel – in ways that would always take me by surprise – that they were right there with me, even holding my hand. It was like a daily Dia de los Muertos and with every name there echoed the refrain.

Presente

Presente

Presente

When we came back together in person, I cleared the list and started again. Same when I went on sabbatical ... only this time because I didn't have the daily interactions to let me know when someone needed prayer, I would reflect on the more than five years we have spent together, and as your faces emerged on my heart, I would just add you to the list.

And that's why I say in the three and a half months we were apart ... in many ways we weren't really apart. I could feel your prayers for me ... and I was praying for you.

And in doing this, I began to realize a couple things.

The first is how amazing and beautiful you are, each of you and all of you. And the more we let ourselves into each other's lives ... particularly the more vulnerable we allow ourselves to be with each other ... the more beautiful we become.

That's not how we feel. So often when we are vulnerable we feel weak and inferior and even ugly ... but that's not true. The more vulnerable we allow ourselves to be, the more beautiful we become. That is one of the truths of Christ.

As my sabbatical went on and I prayed each name, gradually all the tasks and complexities of leadership at All Saints Church fell away and all that was left was the beauty of each human life, each life that is, as Steven Charleston of the Choctaw nation writes in the prayer we shared a few minutes ago, a chapter in a story we all share.

As everything else ... all the organizational concerns and complexities fell away ... all that was left was you. And all there was for me to do was to ask God to bless you, to heal you, to surround you with love and even to love you through me ...

And ... and this is so important ... to ask God to help me to receive the love and care you have for me as well.

I don't know about you but when Jesus says it is more blessed to give than to receive, I feel like he's not giving enough credit to either the blessing or the difficulty of receiving.

We are trained to believe that needing is weakness. I mean, who wants to be called "needy"? Giving can be fun because we usually give out of a place of power. We can develop deep shame around receiving because receiving can so often come from a place of vulnerability and powerlessness.

So, I am becoming convinced that prayer is the gateway to the revolution of which we speak when we say we walk with the revolutionary Jesus.

And make no mistake it is an economic revolution ... only maybe not the one we might think.

And it has to do with our relationship with giving and receiving. With doing and having things done for us.

There is a seductive power to the ability to do great things. Especially great things that do great good. The seduction comes when we believe the saving, healing, transforming power comes from us and is ours to give ... and to withhold.

It is a prison because it perpetuates the economy of the world -- an economy of haves and have nots ... and that is a prison wherever we fall on that spectrum. It is a prison to have nothing and be at the mercy of those who have it all.

And yet it is also a prison to have so much and to believe that our worthiness and lovability only comes from how hard we work to help and heal those who have less. It is a prison to believe that we are the saviors.

It is the definition of an economy that does not need reform but revolution.

I think that might be what Jesus is trying to say in the parable we hear this morning. It's the story of the rich person and Lazarus.

In life, the rich person had everything, and Lazarus had nothing. And there was suffering.

In the next life, Lazarus had everything, and the rich person had nothing. And there was suffering.

The world does not need more saviors with money and resources working harder to justify our wealth.

Jesus is calling us out of that prison to a life of blowing up the whole idea that power is in giving and weakness is in receiving. To blow up the economy of haves and have nots, of saviors and saved and instead fall head over heels into God's economy of love where all give and all receive ... where power is not wielded either for good or ill but instead the power of love flows through and surrounds and binds and heals and sets every single one of us free.

As I prayed your names each day and felt the love of God deepening between us, I could not wait for us to be together again so we could share that love in person.

And then I got COVID and I had to watch Homecoming last Sunday online, and it was so beautiful and I also went through so many tissues because with each of your faces that Keith would pan across, my heart leapt. And as much as my tears were of longing to be together with you, they were also of joy that we get to be together.

And I realized I didn't come back here to lead All Saints Church to its next big world-changing thing. I came back here for what I suspect draws most if not all of us back here again and again and again. Because we are a community of beautiful images of God who aspire to God's economy of love. To rejoice that we and all the faces out there that we never see ... are chapters in a story we all share.

And then I remembered a sermon Rory Lowdermilk preached from this pulpit as she prepared to graduate high school a year ago last June. It was one of the most beautiful and courageous sermons I had ever heard because it cut to the very heart of God's economy of love and how easily we are seduced away from it.

Rory, who was a brilliant young leader in this congregation, said this:

"Church became a business. Between vestry meetings, committee meetings, planning budgets, CYF events ... church felt like a nonprofit. Like a part-time job. ...Somewhere between the emails and the memos, I lost God. God slipped away from me like a child from his mother at the grocery store, I was left standing alone, wondering when I took my eyes off God, wondering when God slipped out the back door and away from me.

"For a while I attended those zoom meetings like I was bound by a curse. And then one day I sent a joke in chat. Some silly little thing, I can't even remember what it was ... and it was like surfacing from deep underwater. It was like being able to hear what the adults were saying in Charlie Brown.

"And after that, I started seeing God again.

"I started seeing God in Monique Thomas' face and in Kelly Erin's messages in the chatbox. I saw God in those run-on sentence text messages from MaryAnn Ahart and in Nina's gap-toothed smile. I started feeling like a kid again. I remembered that I was 17. Yes ... on the verge of adulthood but also at the peak of childhood.... I had spent so much of my time pretending I was an adult and it made me lose God.

"I was so obsessed with impressing all of these adults that I was trying to become one of them. And I lost touch with all of you ... and I lost touch with God.... I am sick of pretending and distancing myself from what I am ... a CHILD of God."

Today is Celebration of Ministries Sunday. It is an amazing celebration of all that we do together as All Saints Church.

Next month, we will engage together in Imagine All Saints, a visioning process that will chart our direction for the months and years to come. I hope you will all take part, this is exciting work we are going to be doing together.

And ... I hope we can help each other not be seduced by the power of what we can do together. I hope we can help each other ... and certainly I need you to help me ... not be like the Israelites in 1 Samuel who begged God to give them a king so they could be like other nations ... who preferred to be incredibly successful in the existing economy rather than follow God's invitation to dismantle that imprisoning economy and live into something infinitely more liberating.

I hope we can help each other ... and certainly I need you to help me ... not to get so engrossed in the business and tasks of being Church that we lose God and lose each other.

So that when we commit ourselves to dismantling white supremacy and allowing God to form us into beloved community it is not because we are trying to do the right thing or atone for some past sins but so we can remove every barrier that might inhibit love's free flow among God's children of every language and hue.

So that when we reach out in love and compassion outside these walls, it is not as saviors but as fellow pilgrims ... conscious not only of what we have to offer but the gifts we have to receive from the deep riches of the images of God who are the self in every soul we see.

So that when we set goals worthy of walking with the revolutionary Jesus, it is not so we can write the next glorious chapter in the history of All Saints Church but so we can laugh and love with an ever-widening circle of faces who until now have been hidden chapters in a story we all share.

I hope we can help each other ... and certainly I need you to help me ... to dare to not be the biggest and the best at what the world likes to measure , to not be so seduced by impressing others by being like them, that we lose God and forget that whatever our age we are all children at heart.

Children of joy.
Children of love.
Children of God.

It is good to be here.
It is good to be home.
Alleluia.
Amen.