

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 6, 2016

“Roll Call.”

Matthew 5:1-12

There is an old story a pastor told about his trip to war-torn Nicaragua. While there, a young man was killed. On a Sunday morning a memorial service was held in a church and the pastor attended.

During the communion service, there was a pause. The congregation was silent. Then someone called out a name. In one voice everyone responded, “Presente!” Another name was called out. Once again the response was, “Presente!” During the service several names were called out and each time the same response: “Presente!” The visiting pastor didn’t understand what was happening until he heard the name of the young man who was killed. Then he realized that all the names were those of persons who had died. From that moment on he joined in shouting, “Presente!”

“Presente” is used by school children or by the military to answer roll call. At the Lord’s table the word “presente” means “in our midst” or “present with us.” Shouting “Presente!” in this worship service was a way of proclaiming the reality of the communion of saints. Although those persons named had all died, their presence and influence was still felt.

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. We remember those persons who have influenced our faith development, whose presence is still felt in our lives even though they now rest from their labors. All Saints Day is the church’s Memorial Day, a time to remember and give thanks to God for those who have died in the faith. With these thoughts in mind, go with me now, to a mountain where Jesus is teaching. He begins with a list of Beatitudes.

Share the Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

These Beatitudes form a picture of the life of a saint. On this All Saints Sunday let’s consider three of the more difficult of these Beatitudes to see if you and I might qualify.

Saints are persons, first of all, who live their lives trusting nothing other than God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” said Jesus. “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Now Jesus isn’t praising the virtues of poverty. He is praising the virtues of faith in God. God is our ultimate source of security. We think if we have enough money, enough land, enough possessions, we will be in control of our lives. We will be protected. We will have security. People who experienced floods, fires and other tragedies, know that control is an illusion. People who have experienced devastating illness, or death of a loved one, know that in this world there is no security. There are times when only faith in God will pull us through.

Another Beatitude is, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” In the original Greek “meek” meant literally the “tamed” or the “broken” as a wild horse is broken. A wild horse is of no use to anyone, but a “meek” or “gentled” horse can carry children. Meekness is a matter of submission to God’s will. Submission is something some of us are not very good at.

You may have heard the amusing story of the first-grader who appeared greatly upset when he came to the principal’s office and requested to use the phone. “Can I help you with something?” the principal asked. The little boy explained, “Yesterday I forgot my sweater at school. This morning my mother told me not to come home without it. I can’t find it anywhere. I want to call her and ask her where she wants me to go!”

For many of us life is a long battle for control. First with our parents, then with our teachers, then with our employers, even with ourselves. We discover we can’t even control ourselves. We have one hope, to yield to God’s control. When we are able to do that, we can rest assured that God will take care of us.

Finally, saints are people who, no matter what happens to them, stand firm in faith. Jesus knew as he addressed his disciples on the mountain top that the day would come when they would be persecuted for believing in him. Jesus knew that living the kind of life that he outlined would be difficult. In his final Beatitude Jesus tried to warn the disciples that the Christian life is sometimes very difficult.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kind of evil against you because of me,” Jesus told his disciples. When those things happen, and they are bound to happen at one time or another, Jesus says, “Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.” All through the ages there have been saints who have suffered because of their Christian convictions. They took unpopular stands, but they remained strong in the faith. They did not waver in the face of adversity. Such persons are examples for us. They offer us a word of hope. They endured and so can we. Bishop Karen Oliveto said, “If you want to be a Christian, you have to look good on wood.”

Don’t lose faith, friends, there is an eyewitness account that tells us that all the saints are standing around the throne of God. In Revelation 7:9-17, the Apostle John gives us this account.

“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice” ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’”

Notice who these saints are: They are the saints who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. We don’t talk in the church about being washed in the blood of the lamb. It’s a little graphic for our modern sensibilities. In Revelation, it is simply a symbolic way of saying these saints have been made worthy to inherit what was promised by the Father because of Christ’s death on the cross. In other words, they are standing around the throne the same way all of us will one day stand around that throne, by the grace of God. If getting into heaven was a matter of merit, we would all be in trouble.

There’s a story about Mother Teresa. In this story Mother Teresa is in heaven and she is dining with God. The only thing in front of them is a couple of tuna fish sandwiches. While they’re eating, she looks down into hell and sees the citizens of that realm feasting on steak, lobster, and crème brûlée. “Not that I’m complaining,” Mother Teresa says to God, “but why are they eating lavishly, and we’re having tuna fish sandwiches?” “Well,” says God, “with just the two of us up here, I figure, why cook?”

If getting into heaven was based on merit, maybe Mother Teresa and a few others make it. But you and I? We would be on the outside looking in. But God’s unconditional love for us and God’s amazing grace will call us home.

I’ve known a few saints in my time, haven’t you? Some of them are now with God. They were not perfect people, but they fit the criteria of being, “trusting, submitting, standing firm.” They blessed my life and they blessed all who knew them. And on this All Saints Sunday I would like to say one thing in their behalf. “Presente.”