

Sermon for Sunday, November 6, 2016  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today we celebrate  
the feast of All Saints,  
the feast when we remember  
all those faithful people  
who have followed Christ throughout the ages  
and whose witness  
continues to inspire us.

And of all our readings  
it's the last line  
of today's gospel  
that rings in our ears.  
"Do to others as you would have them do to you."  
It's the golden rule,  
one that many of us  
heard from our mothers and grandmothers  
as we were growing up.  
And it's great advice.  
But sometimes, I suspect,  
we water it down.  
We take it in isolation  
and allow it to be diluted to that nebulous phrase,  
"Be nice."

Because from Jesus' mouth,  
this isn't just some nice  
down-home wisdom.  
Because it's the summary  
of the previous  
ten  
verses.

And it begins  
with what we know from Matthew's gospel  
as the Beatitudes.  
Those familiar statements

that begin with “Blessed are...”

"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 the way Luke tells it,  
those blesseds  
are paired with woes.

"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”

And that way  
they are much more challenging.

Because I suspect none of us  
can entirely categorize our lives  
under the blesseds.

I certainly can't.

There might be times  
when I weep,  
and times when people speak against me,  
but compared to most of the world  
I am rich,  
and full,  
and spoken well of.  
I sit pretty much

on the woe  
side  
of the equation.

And I think it's to us  
that Jesus' next words are spoken,  
the words that culminate  
in the Golden  
Rule.

"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; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

This morning  
I read a story in the Guardian  
about a Syrian family's  
audience with the Pope.  
It was actually just the parents;  
the three children  
were home in Syria.  
Carolyn and Martin Tamras  
are Syrian Christians,  
who come from a village in the north east of Syria.  
A year ago,  
they had gone on a shopping trip out of town and stayed over, assuming their kids were safe at home.  
But late that night,  
Martin received a phone call  
from their oldest.  
"Daesh are here!"  
Daesh is the name  
that ISIS is called  
in the middle east.  
Making his excuses to his wife,  
Martin drove home to their village, and arrived in time  
to be herded, along with his children and many others  
into captivity.

Ninety-seven people,  
Christians, Hindus, and Muslims alike  
were held captive in an Islamic State prison,  
forced to watch relatives beheaded, and given contaminated food and water.

For the next year,  
family and religious organizations  
were bombarded with demands for a ransom of sixteen  
million dollars.

And Carolyn Tamras  
had to negotiate with an Isis negotiator via text message.

She said

“At first I was disgusted, but then I realized he was human and through this humanity I might help my family. He began to trust me, to tell me about his sick baby. I looked up what medicines might help and sent him back details...I saw humanity in that man.”

A year later, there were rumors that buses had been seen in the village. Relatives of the missing rushed to the village

and were there

when a ransom of five million dollars was handed over - far less than originally demanded.

And as the sacks of money were handed over,  
ninety-three people  
stepped off the buses.

Three had been killed;  
one is still missing.

It was an incredible blessing  
that they had been released,  
but it is not over.

After a year of captivity,  
drinking water fed through pipes used for diesel  
and kept in packed cells where no one had space  
to lie down,  
the hostages all suffer from lung and kidney problems.

And that's only the physical issues.

There is still the psychological trauma from watching torture and killings.

Most of the families of the hostages  
have left Syria.

Only two remain,

and one of those two  
is the Tamras family.

They have chosen to stay  
in order to be witnesses for peace.

Martin says,

“It’s an important opportunity for us to be here because the business of our faith is peace, and so we have a duty to witness this fundamental conviction and to share the story and the message of mercy and love with others,” says Martin.

“Much is written in books about theology; this is not theology, this is life. We have been forced to confront the worst and our role is now to be witnesses. It is a real test to believe in mercy,” he says. “Of course at first I want to kill these Daesh. I want revenge on those who take my children and who kill my cousin and my friend in front of me, and who taunt me that I am next. Those who mock my wife and destroy my home, who want to buy and sell human beings.

“Yes, I want justice, I want them to be brought to justice, but I will not hate them, and I will not hate my Muslim neighbor. It’s important to think, to go back to family, to faith and to education ... only forgiveness breeds peace. Only peace makes us comfortable. We will work together.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/06/from-isis-jail-to-audience-with-pope>

They have chosen,  
time and time again,  
during the captivity  
and now they are free and reunited,  
they have chosen  
to love their enemies.  
To do good to those who hate them.  
To do to others as they would have them do to them.

“The business of our faith is peace.”

It’s an astounding choice;  
it’s what it looks like  
to live out  
our gospel reading today.  
To be the saints of God.

Contrast that response  
to what has been happening in our nation  
this election season.

The airwaves have been full  
of hate-filled speech,  
of people reviling one another.  
Blame has been assigned  
left, right and center.  
Fear is on the ascendency.

And here we are  
called to be saints.  
Called  
to love our enemies,  
to do good to those who hate us,  
to bless those who curse us,  
to pray for those who abuse us,  
to stand quiet as others attack us,  
to give to those who would steal from us.  
To do to others  
not just as we would have them do to us,  
but to go far beyond that,  
to do to them  
the very best  
we can imagine.

This is a crucial time for us as Christians in America.  
Not so much  
because of what will happen at the ballot box.  
But what will happen afterwards.  
Whoever is elected on Tuesday,  
our faith calls us  
to be peacemakers.  
As the saints of God,  
it is our calling  
to work  
to repair the fabric of our society.  
To bring reconciliation  
where there have been incredibly deep divides.

To rebuild trust  
where there is  
To bring hope  
where there is despair.

Because that's who we are  
as people  
of faith.  
Followers  
of Christ.  
Saints  
of God.

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