

Wipe Every Tear

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Revelation 7: 9-17 and Matthew 5:1-12

We live in moments and days of consequence, and we are consequential in how they unfold. In just two days, a presidential election will be held. It goes without saying that I hope you have voted, or will vote, exercising both your civic and sacred duty. With you I am hopeful that we will have a clear result as soon as is responsible and fair.

I have tried to avoid the words and images of division, but it seems clear that we are a divided nation in many ways, and regardless of whether Mr. Trump or Mr. Biden prevails, that will not change on Wednesday morning. A friend said to me: "I live on a street with a neighbor on one side with a Biden sign and a neighbor on the other with a Trump sign; we will still be neighbors on Wednesday and will have to find ways to live together."

That is where the faith perspective, even the Christian perspective, can be of service. We have values – peace, justice, hope – that transcend partisanship and that we are called to apply in all seasons. We are also called to unity, a unity that does not mean uniformity nor a unity that erases disagreement, but a unity that coalesces around a vision – love your neighbor, let justice roll down like a mighty stream, blessed are the peacemakers – that overflows from our faith into our life together in neighborhoods, cities and this nation.

Almighty God, to whom we must account for all our powers and privileges: Guide the people of the United States in the election of officials and representatives; that, by faithful administration and wise laws, the rights of all may be protected and our nation be enabled to fulfill your purposes. Under your law we live, great God, and by your will we govern ourselves. Help us as good citizens to respect neighbors whose views differ from ours, so that without partisan anger, we may work out issues that divide us, and elect candidates to serve the common welfare; through Jesus Christ the Lord. Keep this nation under your care. Bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth. Help us elect trustworthy leaders, contribute to wise decisions for the general welfare, and thus serve you faithfully in our generation, to the honor of your holy name; through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

This week in the city of Philadelphia, in a narrative that is both familiar and unique, police officers shot and killed a man named Walter Wallace, Jr. Protests followed that devolved into violence and looting. Many things are true at the same time, and what is tragic is that we can imagine a different outcome, that a Black man with a mental health diagnosis wielding a knife might still be alive. We remember his life, his family, his neighborhood, his struggles. We remember local businesses and local law enforcement. And, again, because we are reconciled

to God and are therefore called to be God's reconciling agents in the community, even in this anxious mixture of race and policing and protest, we pray for bold and faithful ways to respond.

And we gather on All Saints Day, when November 1 falls on a Sunday. There are many to remember – friends on earth and friends above, as the hymn reminds us. I remember my parents and grandparents and father-in-law and brother-in-law, teachers and coaches and colleagues. You will do the same. We remember church members who have died long ago and who continue to inspire us with their witness. And we remember now church members who have died in the past year. *We remember, O God, those in our number who have died in the past year. We lift before you the names and memories of Jane Conti, Joan Costello, Steven Foldes, Jane Greenawalt, Richard Hassold, John Hausner, James Jones, Marcia Jones, Vera Turner, Peter Van Blarcom, Harry White, Constance Xanthopoulos. We thank you for their lives and for all in them that was good and kind and faithful and that honored your name. We pray for those who continue to grieve and mourn. Comfort them. May all of us be inspired by the faith of the saints, that our lives reflect their commitments and our witness be a blessing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Hear this poem, "Ordinary Saints," by Malcolm Guite.

"The ordinary saints, the ones we know,/ Our too-familiar family and friends,/ When shall we see them? Who can truly show/ Whilst still rough-hewn, the God who shapes our ends?/ Who will unveil the presence, glimpse the gold/ That is and always was our common ground,/ Stretch out a finger, feel, along the fold/ To find the flaw, to touch and search that wound/ From which the light we never noticed fell/ Into our lives? Remember how we turned/ To look at them, and they looked back? That full-/ -eyed love unselfed us, and we turned around,/ Unready for the wrench and reach of grace./ But one day we will see them face to face."

Remember how we turned to them, and they looked back?"

Saints, for us, are those no longer with us. And they are the ones with us still. Debra Dean Murphy writes "We may find this to be a daunting proposition. Sainthood, after all, seems to suggest sinlessness, or at least a singlemindedness of devotion or piety or virtue that we could never muster. And maybe it conjures humorless, holier-than-thou-ness."

That is not what this is. All Saints means just that. All. Saints. Not some. All. And not decent, loving, flawed people, though that may be true. But saints. And not just them, dead or alive. But us. All Saints.

All Saints seems particularly poignant in 2020.

- There are those names. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, Daniel Prude in Rochester, Walter Wallace, Jr. in Philadelphia.
- There are the names of well-known politicians, entertainers, athletes, who we have been inspired by, watched, enjoyed: John Lewis, Chadwick Boseman, Sean Connery, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Kobe Bryant, Eddie Van Halen, baseball stars from my youth like Joe Morgan and Tom Seaver.

- There are the names, and faces, of all those captured in these beautiful portraits in the latest Souls Shot exhibit, victims of gun violence. I am grateful to families and artists and curator Laura Madeleine, and I hope you can find a way to visit in the coming weeks.
- There are, of course, the 232,000 who have died as a result of COVID-19, and the countless more who have died during COVID-19 isolated. We remember them, their families and all who loved and cared for them. I am on a large e-mail distribution list, and one of our number, early 70's, died from COVID. I did not know him, but it reminded me that in the deep sadness of 232,000 there abides the particular sadness of one.

And there are the living saints. That's another point of All Saints. Names we know and names known only to God and to those whose lives are better because of their witness. Nurses. Doctors, Police officers. Medical researchers. Teachers. Grocery workers, Truck drivers. Wait staff. They are saints as well.

Two things happen this day.

- We remember, and grieve.
- And we take comfort and find inspiration.

Both matter.

In the Book of Revelation, still mysterious to us, we hear a vision. A great multitude. All the dead. They will hunger no more and thirst no more, and the Lamb, Jesus, will be their center, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Eric Mathis writes that "There is no limit to the scope of this multitude, be it geographic, ethnic, numeric, linguistic, economic, and on and on the list goes." *Every tear will be wiped away.*

In Matthew's gospel we hear again what are familiarly called the Beatitudes, a series of declarations that those who Jesus names are blessed, are happy, in a deeper sense of happiness. They are so familiar that we might hear them with only half an ear.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Debra Dean Murphy writes that "we know that (Jesus) is not enjoining chin-up cheerfulness in the face of blinding sorrow. Rather, we have it on Jesus' authority here that 'in deep sadness human beings are in God's hands more than at any other time' (Dale Bruner)."

We remember the saints, those no longer with us and those among us. As we mourn the deaths of those we love, we are comforted, and therefore we can comfort those we love. Dean Murphy writes that "we have the privilege of making a gift of our own tears as we attend to those who grieve—the wounded, the weary, the broken, the brokenhearted."

And we remember that we are saints as well, and have work to do. Sharon Brezard writes that "I suspect many people today look at the traditional 'saint' as either inaccessible or otherworldly and beyond mere mortal comprehension... someone whose image is stamped on a medallion or carved into statuary, or else who died a gruesome death for his or her faith in Jesus Christ." That is not what sainthood is.

David Lose counters that perception: "I think this is what it means to be a *saint* -- to recognize that God has called us by name, chosen us before the founding of the world, and promised to do great things through us for the sake of all the other saints God loves so much."

Eric Mathis writes that "We are saints because God's sanctity is at work in us, not because on our own we have come to great spiritual attainment."

Hear this poem by Amy Gerstler, called "All Saints Day."

The holiday arrives/quietly like phrases/of faint praise/in Braille. Famous/saints bow at the waist,/then step back, making/room for scores/of unknown saints,/ to whom this day/also belongs. Not/a glamorous bunch,/these uncanonized,/unsung ones, shading/their eyes shyly/in the backs of the minds/of the few who knew them./Hung-over, mute, confused,/hunched, clumsy, blue,/pinched, rigid or fidgety,/unable to look the radioactive,/well-dressed major saints/in the eye, they wonder/terrified: What/Am I Doing Here? Still/drenched, the tobacco/spitting fisherman who dove/after a dog swept downriver/looks in vain for a towel,/ too timid to ask. (His dog/now sports a halo, too.)/Robed in volcanic ash,/ a brave Pompeii matron/is mistaken by St. Catherine/for a sooty statue. An old/coot who serenaded/his dying wife with her/favorite ukulele tunes/is still trying to find her,/as his map of the afterlife/proved unreliable. What can/we offer these reticent saints/who lacked press agents?/Flowers? Lit candles? Floating/lanterns? The nerdy/fat whistle-blower from/the chemical plant/whose plaid slacks/made his coworkers/laugh behind his back/nervously jokes sotto/voce that he'd give/his soul for a Coke,/but no one can hear him."

If you are mourning, I pray that you will be comforted, and know that the tears of your now-gone loved ones have been wiped away.

If you can in this season, find ways to comfort others, to wipe away their tears.

And embrace your calling to be a saint, to do the quotidian work of holiness.

"O blessed communion, fellowship divine.

We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.

Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.

Alleluia. Alleluia."

Amen.