**“They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love”**

**The Feast of All Saints**

**1 November, A.D. 2015**

**Scriptures:**

Isaiah 25:6-9

UMH 517 (see appendix)

Revelation 21:1-6

John 11:32-44

Last week was Reformation Sunday, and we talked about the Protestant doctrine known as “Sola Scriptura,” which affirms that everything needed for salvation is contained within Scripture. A more nuanced interpretation of this idea is that the Truth of God, the self-revelation of the Divine Being, is waiting to be discovered in the narratives of Israel, Jesus Christ, and the Church, and that we may expect to find Truth in the Scripture by the power and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

This week, however, is the Feast of All Saints: a day upon which we remember that the Truth of the scriptures has also been handed down, generation after generation, from those who were eye witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Christian ritual practices of Preaching, Healing, celebrating the Eucharist, and initiating disciples through Baptism precede the composition of the New Testament scriptures by several decades at the least. And the witness and work of the Saints is the content of countless stories through the centuries. We have heard of these champions of the faith whose lives seem to be the very definition of discipleship. We see their sacrifices, and we hear their clarion cry: “God has come to us in person, in Jesus Christ our Lord; and though they put him to death out of fear and greed, Christ is risen; he is risen indeed!” We have received the Truth of the Good News from those who have gone before us, which leaves us with the question: What do we do with our doubt?

Let us pray:

Merciful God, you have given yourself to us that we might know who you are and how you love us; and you have been pleased to use the lives of your people to bring us to an experience of your power and presence in our time. We offer our weakness and doubt to you: make our words become your Living Word, that we might experience your grace and be transformed. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Doubt is something that gnaws at all of us. We’ve heard the stories, we’ve sung the songs of faith, and we’ve witnessed the complete conviction of others; yet in our own walk through life there seems to be a discrepancy between those whom the church holds up as examples and our own experience. And even if we are deeply involved in worship, or service, or charity, or the care of others in countless ways, must we not admit that our motivation is often a humanistic compassion for our fellow creatures, rather than a response to a palpitating, inward conviction that the Gospel is, in fact, true?

I know that this is the case for me. Often I am left with questions about the surety of God’s presence and, if God is who we say he is, why God doesn’t show himself more plainly. Why must we have faith to see the signs? If grace is real, why is the world so broken? If I am called to the ministry of the ordained for the edification and sanctification of the church, why do I feel so empty sometimes, so low in my spirit, so vile and sinful in my ways? These are my questions. I will assume that I am not alone in having questions like these and that you, as well, experience moments, or even long periods, when you find it hard to believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. In response to this pastoral problem, I want to turn the tables on these stories of the Saints, and show three in particular who are generally lauded for their sincerity, brilliance, and power, but who, in fact, struggled with doubt their entire lives: St. Francis of Assisi, the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, and the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

+ + +

You may not know this, but “Francis” was not actually his first name. St. Francis’ father was a wealthy merchant in Assisi, and while he was away on a business trip, his wife gave birth to his firstborn. She named him John, after John the Baptist. But Francis’ father was decidedly not a religious man and was not going to have a son who turned out to be a churchman. So changed John’s name to Francis, which in Italian is “Francesco.”

This is an odd name for an Italian because it means “Frenchman.” But what is revealed in this is his father’s infatuation with the romance and gourmande food and art of French culture. And this is how Francis grew up: surrounded by wealth, he had everything money could by; he spent his father’s wealth on parties and debauchery – a habit which he resumed when he returned home after receiving his education. But the one thing Francis lacked that money could not by, and which he had to win for himself, was nobility. So when the call for the fifth Crusade came, he bought himself a suit of armor, and he bought himself a horse, and proclaimed to the folk of Assisi that he would come back from the conquest of the Holy Land no less than a prince.

A days journey into the ride, however, he had a vision. It interrupted his life in a violent way, convincing him of his futility, the futility of his ambition, and the futility of his father’s silk business. He returned home in disgrace, was mocked by his friends and family as a coward, and, finally, was put by his father before the magistrate and the bishop and disowned. Francis’ father demanded that he repay everything that had been spent on the Crusade and declared that Francis was no longer his son and heir. In response, Francis stripped off his rich clothes, folded them neatly, and gave them back to his father saying: Today I am no longer the son of Pietro Bernardone, and I may truly pray, “Our father in heaven.”

Not many of us have a conversion experience as dramatic as this, but it is important to note that it took Francis the rest of his life to figure out how to be faithful to God. He didn’t overcome his pampered and lascivious life in a few months. He went from having everything money could by, to leaving his hometown with nothing on but the sack an onlooker threw to him for the sake of modesty. For Francis, doubt and faith were always in tension. But in the face of grueling poverty and deprivation, Francis began to see the wealth that is the gift of God’s grace and the beauty that is God’s creation. When the Roman Pontiff finally ratified his movement as a certified religious order, such that Francis became the Abbot of thousands of monks and nuns, Francis resigned and spent the few remaining years of his life preaching and healing.

+ + +

Our second example is the Reverend Mr. John Wesley. You all know the famous story about Mr. Wesley: how one evening after hearing Evensong at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, he went to a book club down on Aldersgate Street where they were studying Luther’s preface to the Book of Romans. If you’re a Methodist you know this bit… how Wesley had an experience where he felt his heart strangely warmed. The surprising fact, however, that we almost never talk about is that subsequent to this experience, he hardly ever refers to it again in his journals.

You see, the intensity of Wesley’s experience faded; he found that he was not free from sin, and he doubted, in fact, whether he was a Christian at all. In the 1740s and 50s, when the Methodist movement was really beginning to take root and people were beginning to think there was something to this “method” – this demand for accountability to the example and commands of Christ – Wesley was consumed with doubt as to whether he was saved. He could not say for sure whether God had chosen him for salvation. Yet he found in this no reason to forego the commands of Christ.

Observe in this Wesley’s inability to convince himself that there is no God. In the midst of his doubt and his spiritual anguish, he can never bring himself to be convinced that God does not exist. But he did struggle in the profound tension between his mystical experience of the presence and power of the Spirit, and the intellectual assurance of his salvation. This tension plagued Wesley his whole life, but he never gave up his chief concerns: to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those whose lives put them outside the acceptable circles of English society, and to put the Gospel to use in his practical concern for the healthcare, education, and material well-being of the poor. In the end, it was the fact that he saw God’s grace at work in others that convinced him that he too was not outside God’s grace, that he too was being sanctified by the power of God’s love.

Wesley earned a lot of money over the course of his life. He was a controversial figure and his publications were well read by both his friends and his enemies. But, like St. Francis, he gave it all away. By living in the debilitating tension between doubt and faithfulness, he came to understand that there is nothing of value in this life beyond the richness of God’s grace. It took him a whole lifetime of spiritual devotion and work to finally come to the deep conviction that participation in the salvation and glory of Jesus Christ was part of his future.

There is a story about Wesley that one snowy, damp, cold, rainy night, he was found trudging through the London slush, knocking door to door asking for money for the poor. He knew, like the apostle Paul, whom he quoted often, that “the only thing which matters is faith made effective through love” (Galatians 5:6). Despite his autocratic leadership and strict demands on his pastor’s and followers, he himself suffered from a doubt which only the experience of grace could overcome.

+ + +

Finally, I offer for your consideration Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the revered Benedictine nun. The world was stunned a few years ago when her private diary was published, revealing a woman who struggled for the better part of her adult life with a crushing experience of the silence of God. This woman who had washed the lepers and fed the starving thousands of Calcutta – how could she ever have experienced doubt in the presence and power of the Triune God. Considered by all the epitome of Christ-likeness and selfless servanthood, how could she be racked with an unending, debilitating, and unanswered yearning for God to speak? How could she compose the final section of her diary in which she prayed, “O God, if you really exist, forgive my doubt.”

By what strength was she able to continue? By what power was she able to survive that pastoral and material care of millions, those countless souls who experienced the grace of her holy kiss and the hope of her attention and embrace. Dear friends, the answer is very short and can be summed in one word: Love.

Love overcomes the brokenness, sin, and death of the world. The experience of Love overcomes our doubts, not because it drives them away, but because it is a feeling that runs deeper than our doubt. The giving and receiving of Love demands no agreement, no articulation. When love is given and received, the Truth of the Gospel is made plain; for it is Love that exemplifies the life of the Son of God.

Like us, Jesus cannot forego his pain at the death of Lazarus, nor should we forego the pain we feel in the loss of our loved ones. When we do not feel the pain, we will have forgotten them: we will have ceased to love them. Ten years ago, my singing coach, Dixie Neill, died from complications due to ovarian cancer. I never stop feeling that loss: every time I open my mouth to sing, she is present to me; every time I remember her captivating insight and hilarious profanity, I am consumed anew with my yearning to see her face, hear her voice, and listen to hear play the piano. In the death of Lazarus, Jesus, like us, feels the full and final reality of the nothingness of the grave. In that moment, the scriptures show us the utter humanity of God, for Emmanuel himself was overcome by the grief of death and its seemingly irrevocable parting. But when his heart breaks for his friends what flows fourth from that open wound is Love. It is in love that love Jesus weeps for his friend. And in that love, Jesus reveals God’s glory by giving life again to the one who had ceased to be.

Do you not find it curious that later in his life, this same Jesus would be so consumed with doubt and fear that he would grovel on the ground in anguish, weeping and sweating blood, and beg a silent God to remove from before him the path that would lead to the Cross. Does not our Lord and Savior find himself in the most profound doubt, the most profound anguish in the emptiness of God’s silence? Yet what is his response: “Not my will, but thine be done.” This statement can only be interpreted as a declaration of love.

And so, through all the ages of the church, apostolic and universal, the saints have lived lives of love in the midst of their pain and doubt and fear. In the imitation of Christ, the saints – including those lately among us whom we remember today – have stood in the face of death, in the abyss of human emptiness, and declared with their love for others and for the world that the promises of God are ones that can be trusted, even unto death – even beyond death.

When you cannot bring yourself to believe: Love. When the religion and the church have lost all their savor, consumed by rancor and strife and hypocrisy: Love. When our technological and global society scoffs at the very idea of God: Love. And do not give up your dead, but remember them; live by the hope with which they went to the grave, that hope for the eternal union of Heaven and Earth found only in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God for all those who have gone before us, and finished their course in faith. May they be blessed for ever; and may all who come behind us know we were Christians by our love.

 Amen.

*the Rev. Jonathan Bratt Carle, MDiv.*

*Pastor, Trinity United Methodist Church*

Appendix

United Methodist Hymnal #517

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,

 and confidently waiting, come what may,

**we know that God is with us night and morning,**

 **and never fails to greet us each new day.**

 Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,

 still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;

**O give our frightened souls the sure salvation**

 **for which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.**

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming

 with bitter sorrow, hard to understand,

**we take it thankfully and without trembling,**

 **out of so good and so beloved a hand.**

Yet when again in this same world you give us

 the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,

**we shall remember all the days we lived through,**

 **and our whole life shall then be yours alone.**

 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer (translated by Fred Pratt Green)*

 Bonhoeffer was hung by the Nazis days before the Allied

 liberation of the concentration camp in which he was incarcerated.