

ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY  
November 5, 2017  
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Did you go trick-or-treating this year? Now there are trunk-or-treat events and safety lists all over the internet. I thought the days of trick-or-treating were over for me, but then I found myself escorting a small honeybee by the name of Eleanor through the streets of downtown Pearl River, New York where all the store keepers on main street welcome the town's children. Hundreds of children go from shop to shop to get goodies. Eleanor (the honeybee) fell right in with the crowd. It didn't take her long to get the hang of it.

Store owners say ooh and ahh.  
You open up your purple bag with both hands.  
And, ...in goes the candy!

Like clockwork. Walk to the next shop, repeat.

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Eleanor did get a little confused at one point, however. She went up to two women who were just standing by, watching the parade of children. She stood directly in front of them and opened up her purple bag. Nothing happened. She stared at them. They didn't even notice her. Eleanor didn't budge. She just waited. Bag open. They had no idea what she was doing! Her mom picked her up to move her along but she looked back and gave them *one big frown!*

Having all the children out together, like that, up and down main street, before dark— was a great idea. You could actually see their costumes and enjoy their excitement, multiplied by hundreds of happy candy-getting kids! Caped heros. Green hulks. Blue underwater creatures. Blue and pink-sparkly princesses. Giant brown dinosaurs who decided to “have it out” in the middle of the street, bumping big dinosaur heads.

I always enjoy reciting the traditional Scottish poem and prayer at Halloween:

*From ghoulies and ghosts  
And long-leggedy beasties  
And things that go bump in the night,  
Good Lord, deliver us!*

But then comes All Saints' Day! So completely different! All the darkness disperses, fog and ghosts disappear, and there is a quiet stillness. It seems as if the weather always cooperates, is always beautiful—crisp air, a cloudless blue sky, the kind you see after a terrible storm.

Every All Saints' Day I remember a woman I met many years ago who in her dying, taught me how to live my life. Her name was Katherine. I officiated at her funeral on All Saints' Day at the old Greenmount Cemetery in Baltimore. Now there's a place you don't want to be on Halloween night! (John Wilkes Booth is buried there in an unmarked grave!) It was a cold crisp day. There were three of us there to do the remembering. Katherine was an older woman who never married. I used to visit her frequently in her small one-bedroom apartment in Baltimore. She would fix me a cup of tea and we'd share a plate of cookies. We were both alumni of the same college, years apart of course. I suppose that might have been one of the reasons she befriended me. She loved her college. And she loved her church. She told me many stories about going to church as a child, about sitting under the pews and her father giving her bread crusts to eat to keep her quiet. And, handing her his gloves "to busy her fingers with." I often think about her sitting there under the pews. Sometimes I look to see if any children are under our pews. And I wonder what our children will remember about their time here with us, in this church.

Katherine was frugal. She walked to work and she saved her money because she wanted to leave significant gifts upon her death to her two favorite institutions—her college and her church. I was impressed with her singleminded focus, her mission, even though her life seems to be just working and sleeping and working and sleeping, and going to work again. Then after a time, Katherine couldn't care for herself any longer and it was decided that she needed to go to an assisted living facility. She had no family, so her lawyer handled the details. She went to live in the sort of place that requires that you give them all that you have and in return you will be cared for, for as long as you live regardless of how long your money lasts. You sign it away at the beginning but it will never run out. Katherine's lawyer said it was necessary so Katherine went to live at the facility. I knew she wasn't very happy about it. She told me so. It pained her to tell me the fate of all her savings, all those years of saving every dime. It pained me to hear about it. But then, very shortly after she moved in—just weeks—Katherine became seriously ill. It was apparent that she was dying. I thought, "If she had just waited a few more weeks! What a shame she didn't get to do with her life savings, what she had worked so hard for!" Then there was a turn of events that changed everything! I happened to speak with her lawyer and he told me that he had not yet signed the papers turning over her savings. "Do you mean her life savings will still go to her college and her church?" "Yes," he said. "I've got to tell Katherine!" I couldn't wait to see her and tell her. I went to visit her straight away but I found her in bed, very still. Her breathing was labored. "Katherine," I whispered. "I have really good news for you. The papers to this place—they were never signed. Your savings will go where you wanted it to go!"

I was sure this would make her very happy. But when she looked at me, she just nodded. The fever, the anxiety over her life's plan was over. She was free of all that. I was still carrying her anxiety over it! (Like my granddaughter, I was just standing there with my purple bag open, waiting, expecting candy!) But Katherine was moving on. I could see that clearly. She was already free. She had already given herself over. She was already at peace. Katherine smiled and took my hand, not because of the news I had brought but because she was a loving person, and she wanted to say good-bye.

The message I received from her that day—the life-lesson was this: When you are free, you are truly alive. When you are done with the fretting and hand wringing, you are free to love and be loved, to be present with another person, just as you are and just as they are. She wasn't mad or trying to control the outcome of things. She was so much bigger than the small stuff. She might have been a little happy about the savings, but if so, only because she thought I was happy about it. Right then and there, I wanted to “let go” like her, but now, long before death! Not just at the time of death. I wanted to “let go” and then see what living could be like! Wouldn't it be a wonderful way to live? To live as if you were already dead! Dead to the things that don't really matter. Dead to all the stuff that gets in the way. To let go, now, long before death? To be at peace with ourselves and in our relationships with each other!

I prayed with Katherine:

*Support us all the day long, O Lord, until the shadows lengthen  
and the evening comes,  
and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over,  
and our work is done.  
Then, in your mercy,  
grant us a safe lodging, a holy rest,  
and peace at the last. Amen.*

In a surprising way, Katherine's story is perhaps what today's gospel is pointing us toward. Jesus' admonishment of the scribes and Pharisees as teachers points to a different way—a way of life that is radically different from what we suppose—what we have been taught. Jesus says to his followers that they should listen to what the scribes and Pharisees say, those who sit in the Seat of Moses and teach with authority. He says listen to what they say, but don't live the way they live! What is this supposed to mean? It means that Jesus offers something different. Although the Law itself contains Truth, the old way of interpreting and teaching the Law lays heavy burdens on the people, weighs us down, makes it impossible to live faithful lives. There are 600

and some laws to worry about! Way too much for anyone to master. Phylacteries (mentioned in this lesson) are little boxes worn on the forehead by the orthodox that contain the Torah—a constant reminder of the law and of the law’s requirements. For the common man and woman this is a constant reminder of what we cannot achieve. Our phylacteries are more like the furrows on our foreheads—furrows of anxiety and tension and stress and failure.

Jesus offers something different. He offers a way of life that leads to hope rather than despair. To a way of life that takes all those regs and all those worries and requires only that we try to love God and love our neighbors and love ourselves. This is not a heavy load but one that will bring hope and a life-well-lived.

Jesus says,

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.

There’s a proverb at the end of the reading today. A proverb that is found three times in Matthew’s Gospel. Twice in Mark. And twice in Luke. Undoubtedly it is a very early, authentic piece that circulated in the oral stage of the church’s tradition.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled.  
And all who humble themselves will be exalted.

The way of life that Jesus offers is an inversion. It’s a reversal. It requires that we flip the book—the things we’ve already learned—upside down. What matters most in the kingdom of God isn’t what we do but what God’s does. Our hope is in God’s love and mercy.

The good news in this? What Katherine came to see in her last days is:

“Not my will, but thy will be done.”  
And, “For God, all things are possible.”

Someday we will leave behind the life we have created for ourselves, the possessions we have acquired, and the wealth we have accumulated. It might be next week, in five years, or thirty years. Or we can choose today—each day—to let go and then to live. We can choose today not to take ourselves more seriously than we take God, who is the creator and giver of all life.

We are not the owners of our life but stewards and caretakers of God's life in us and in the world. We are caretakers of each other and ourselves. I wonder what Katherine's life would have looked like if she had been able to let go sooner? I wonder how she might have used her savings while she was alive? I wonder if she would have enjoyed more of the people and things around her? I wonder who she might have helped along the way. I wonder if she would have traveled to see this marvelous world that God created. I wonder what my life and your life would like if we were to unburden ourselves from so much control? Bit by bit? Day by day?

The lesson? The life we really seek is already given. The love that makes life worth living is already ours. Even death cannot take what is already given. Henri Nouwen speaks of spiritual direction as a process of encouraging someone to unwrap themselves—like taking off the wrappings of a Halloween mummy. We suffocate bound up by our anxieties, possessions, obsessions, resentments, fears, and angers. And if we do not unbind the past and let it go, but keep wrapping and wrapping and wrapping, we cut off all possibilities of breath and life. That's a real Halloween scare! Unwrapping, unbinding and letting go means we trust God to breath new life into us, to make us and all his creation something new.

Saints are those who have been unbound and let go. God is not done with them yet! They are our witnesses that it is safe to die, that letting go, in whatever form it might take, is not an ending but a beginning. God is not done with them yet! God is not done with us yet! The saints cry out to us, they sing, "Go get 'em! Don't let em get you down! Hold out that purple bag and let the goodies come! And Jesus says, "Trust in God. And trust in me, always." "You can do it!" the saints shout. "Get up and get going! Unwrap yourselves! And live!"

AMEN