

The Wisdom of Unknowing

Luke 6:20-31

Whitefish UMC

All Saints Celebration, October 31, 2010

- † Each autumn, around this week of the year or so, I make a pilgrimage to Chicago to see my family. This year Tom and I will travel to celebrate my father's 90th birthday. His official birthday is on All Saints Day, tomorrow, but the surprise party will be next Sunday. You know that my dad is a devout Roman Catholic, and when I was little, his birthday was overshadowed for him by attending mass and marking this special holy day.
- † As I child, I didn't know much of anything about All Saints Day, and I didn't really care. It was more of an afterthought to Halloween, which of course we loved. We Protestants didn't celebrate All Saints, but we did recognize Reformation Sunday, also falling around the same time.
- † Thankfully, we Protestants and Roman Catholics now share more special holy days, and so today we turn toward recognizing the saints of our faith and our lives. Who are they? Surely for Christians they begin with the first followers of Jesus: Peter and his brother Andrew; James and John, sons of the fisherman Zebedee; Simon; another James; Thaddeus and Bartholomew about whom we don't know much; Matthew the tax collector; Philip, one of Peter's neighbors; Thomas the twin; and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. It all began with this group of men—and women, too: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna.

- † John Buchanan writes: “Saints because they were there. They knew him, knew his voice, what he looked like, his eyes piercing, what his hand felt like when it clasped their own, Saints because one by one, in one way or another, they lived out the rest of their lives on earth trying to do what he asked them to do: teaching, healing, welcoming, loving the world with his love. And each of them, in one way or another, died for him, even Judas, who of all of them never quite understood what Jesus was about or how unconditionally he loved them, even him, Judas, in his despicable betrayal.
- † Saints, but sinners too, men and women just like you and me. Frederick Buechner writes, ‘Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixtures in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us.’
- † ‘The reason he made his church out of human beings,” Buechner observes,’ is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It’s a point worth remembering’ (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 147).”
- † These words from the wise Frederick Beuchner are comforting words, for me, at least. They help me correct the old idea I had of saints who wore their haloes with great humility and perfection. How freeing to know that saints, both living and dead, aren’t perfect in every way.
- † Even in their imperfection we can learn from the saints of our faith and our lives. For like it or not, they have formed who we are in belief and action. For all my parents’ arguments over who had the right way of worshipping God, for all the pain it caused in my family, my search for a different way of inclusion and invitation arose out of that conflict.

- † So we celebrate the saints of our lives today, warts and all. A little background is in order. The Christian feasts of All Saints and All Souls on November 1st and 2nd honor the legacy of wisdom our ancestors have left to us and continue to offer. In the Northern hemisphere the world is entering the dark half of the year. The ancient Celtic people believed this time was a thin space, where heaven and earth whispered to one another across a luminous veil and those who walked before us are especially accessible in these late autumn days. These moments on the great turning of the year's wheel offer us invitations and gifts for our spiritual journeys.
- † As the earth prepares to enter winter, she sheds what she no longer needs and moves inward. We live in a world illuminated by artificial light and so we often forget the wisdom to be gained from being in darkness. With the busyness of our lives, we resist the call of winter to fallowness and to contemplate what mortality means for us.
- † One writer for the ecumenical organization Patheos says: “the darkness of this season invites us to release all of our certainties about how God works in the world, and sink into the deep unknowing. *Apophasis* is the way of darkness in Christian spirituality and has a deep and rich tradition among the mystics, including Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross. When we enter the wisdom of night we discover that God is so much larger than what we can imagine and that many of our beliefs have become idols, and that the call to a mature spirituality has more to do with surrendering our attachments than in gaining enlightenment.
- † We live in a world where certainties about God are the impulse behind violent acts and the violation of people's dignity. Perhaps if we all recognized that the way of unknowing was the necessary complement to the way of images and knowing, we would act with more humility and be less

willing to speak for God. Our ancestors have passed over into the Great Night and they call to us across the threshold to release our tight grip on what we think we know.

- † We are surrounded by a great “cloud of witnesses” Paul’s letter to the Hebrews (12:1) tells us. We don’t often make room for the honoring of ancestors or valuing what connection to the stories of our past might bring to us. For me, honoring the Communion of Saints means recognizing that the lives lived before mine matter. It means remembering that there is ancient wisdom wrought from generations of engagement and struggle with life. We can call upon those who have confronted the great mystery of being across time.
- † We carry the stories of our ancestors in our genetic code; they beat in our blood. When we uncover the layers of the stories our family systems have lived for generations we begin to understand ourselves better. Some of these stories we may know the details of, and some we may only experience in an intuitive way. These memories live inside of us, waiting for us to give them room in our lives. Within me is a sacred thread that ties me to everyone in my ancestral past. I carry within me the wounds and unfulfilled longings, the hopes and dreams of everyone who came before me. Learning their stories means I come to know my own more intimately.
- † Each of us has concentric rings to our stories -- my story is embedded in the story of my family, which is nestled in the story of my parents' families, and so on back through generations. This genetic story is wrapped in cultural stories, the places and events that shaped the people who came before me -- scripture, language, music, landscape, and the trauma of war that carries down from generation to generation. This cultural story is shaped by the unfolding story of nature and the cosmos. We might imagine ourselves as a

smooth stone dropped in a lake, and the center of the ripple widening out to the great shores of God.

- † In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker writes:
- † *And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see -- or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."*
- † I find this writer's words intriguing. I hope she means mothers and grandmothers, parents, fathers and brothers and sisters in the broadest sense, because certainly our ancestors and the saints of our lives are not necessarily blood relatives.
- † This November, my trip to Chicago will be different and empty of a treasured element. In the past several years, I've had the privilege of visiting my high school French teacher, Alice LaPert. In the 1960's, our French teacher inspired both great love and powerful fear. She was a bit of a tyrant—insisting on perfect pronunciation, penmanship, grammar, and inflection.
- † A professional woman who had never married, our teacher, in her early fifties during our years, was a coquette in the best sense. She wore perfectly French outfits, including a tomato colored chemise under her silk dress. She taught us to read all the French classics of literature—Racine, Moliere, Dumas, and the French poets. To this day, I can still recite the sword scene in *Cyrano de Bergerac*.
- † Madame LaPert organized field trips to the Goodman theater when French plays were performed there and took us to out-of—the way French bistros for a taste of something other than the suburban food we got at home. She

never owned a car, walked everywhere or took public transportation, and read widely.

- † The years passed, and when my mother entered assisted living six years ago, Madame LaPert, it turned out, lived in the same facility as my mother, until my mother's dementia required more intensive care. What a blessing it was to meet my favorite teacher again and to talk with her about her life, to thank her for giving me a love of French language and culture, for the gifts of discipline and love.
- † Sadly my teacher died a couple of weeks ago at the age of 97. She died mentally alert and in her small apartment. She attributed her long life to vanity and good genes. But I think there was something more. In our last visits, Madame shared her sense of a great cloud of witnesses who were her teachers and students. She embraced life's mysteries with a twinkle and a Gallic shrug. She looked forward to the great Mystery ahead. Though she had no children of her own, she thought of us, her young students, as her golden pupils. (I suspect she said that to each generation of students, although we were sure she meant only our class.)
- † Madame LaPert is a saint I will remember especially this year. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke (not a French poet, but that's okay) writes *The darkness embraces everything/It lets me imagine/a great presence stirring beside me./I believe in the night.*
- † As darkness descends on the earth, remember that as Christians we are shaped by more than our own experiences; we are shaped by our hopes, by the future into which we are living, and by the convictions by which we are living. Hope is best perceived by the eyes of the heart. Hope is best lived within the hopeful community, in the company of saints both living and departed.

- † An old Hasidic tale tells of a disciple who asked his rabbi the meaning of community one evening, when they were all sitting around the fire. The rabbi sat in silence while the fire died down to a pile of glowing coals. Then he got up and took one coal out from the pile and set it apart on the stone hearth. Its fire and warmth soon died out.
- † It is in the community of saints that we find our life and vitality as we seek to live as carriers of the torch of faith. We may not feel much like saints or as if we are up to the task ahead. Stanley Hauerwas argues that Christians cannot try to become saints. Nor, he says, are saints heroes and heroines of the faith.
- † Instead, they are “people like us who have been made more than we are by being engrafted into God’s kingdom that is ruled by forgiveness and love.” We come today to remember the saints, to honor the preparations they made for us and that we will make together for those that will follow us.
- † At Bill Leonard’s memorial service, his son Shawn spoke of Bill’s preparations in advance of a camping trip to Lake Elizabeth in Glacier Park, of the arduous journey to their destination, and of how that prepared Shawn for his experiences in his later life as a soldier and leader.
- † Shawn spoke of how Bill has gone before to prepare the campsite that will welcome those who come after to the Mystery of God’s eternal home. The destination may look different in each of our imaginations, and in truth, we won’t know what awaits us until we get there.
- † Nevertheless, we trust in the Communion of Saints to welcome us, in God’s goodness and promise, in Jesus’ resurrection, and the Spirit’s leading. Let us sing, then, a song of the Saints of God, faithful and brave and true.
- Amen.

Sources:

Christine Valters Painter, “Luminous Wisdom of Night,” <http://www.patheos.com>

John Buchanan, “Saints, Sinners, and the Gates of Hell,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Feasting on the Word, 2010.