

Pastor Roy's Sermon from Nov. 4, 2012

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ps. 46, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Isaiah speaks of feasts of rich food, of well aged wines. The removal of a shroud called death. Tears wiped away, shame and disgrace removed. Waiting and more waiting for God.

But here is a God who saves not according to our priorities—salvation is granted with much rejoicing and great gladness.

This is the stuff of the saints. Death exchanged for a fine feast. Waiting, being saved, allowing God to remove shame and disgrace and leave behind gladness and celebration. Sometimes loud, sometimes silent.

When I read this passage, I don't think of a heaven in which everything is exactly the way we have wished it could be during our time on earth. I don't think of the exact righting of wrongs. That often involves God's blessing of my priorities and opinions. Instead, I believe this passage at its deepest level speaks of true wisdom and a holy, gracious, just perspective which resets all of our expectations. There is a big difference. This new reality begins today. Each new day. Living in the light of God's mercy. That God has created us all for glory—set apart for mercy and peace. That's what it means to be a saint. Set apart, not from all the others, but set apart to take our faithful place as a holy nation—humanity which acts not only for itself but on behalf of all of creation.

Ah, but there is a difference between talking about these true, profound realities, and experiencing them. The lives of the saints were and are filled with waiting, unknowing, misunderstanding, and trouble.

When the power goes out during a bad storm, the most difficult aspect is that you don't know how long you'll be without power. Bailing water, concerned about keeping frozen things cold, or the house warm. If illness strikes, it's ok when it comes and goes, but the uncertainty of chronic illness? Or walking with one's children or parents or siblings through difficult periods, will they be ok?

Life is filled with waiting. Ultimately, I believe everything for which we wait becomes a waiting for God. Can we trust—regardless? If we are honest we have an endless confession of weakness—not of strength. The Saints whom people look back upon as being the “greatest” were in so many ways keenly aware of their leastness. They didn't walk on water. They didn't effortlessly live the holy life. Instead, they scraped the bottom of the barrel. They lingered in the place of waiting and unknowing.

Despite the struggle, the saints learned to trust that God dwells in the place of struggle, in the uncertainty of learning that death is swallowed in the loving-kindness of God's mercy. By the One who is making all things new. . . Who is the beginning and the end. . . who to the thirsty will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Then, we come upon Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb—but not because of everyone's lack of faith. He wept because life is full of difficulty ending in death with sorrow that brings everyone with a soul to tears. The loss of family and friends. Losses connect us to deeply held emotions. Everything is connected for us even as it was for Jesus. So he weeps. We weep because we know that we come

from dust and to dust we shall return. We also weep because we know that dust is good.

The Saints embrace with Jesus their own dustness. Jesus knew he was dust. God and dust. Dust and God. We are very much dust. The Spirit of God takes up residence in our dust to bring a feast of dust. The Saints learn to find freedom and comfort in their weakness and lowliness. There is no shame in it. Shame and despair come as we resist our dustness—when we find it necessary to prove that we aren't what we are. Accepting our humanity, our dust, allows us to receive the simple gift of life and grace from God. It fills us with gratitude and generosity of spirit. Saints are reminded time and time again that life is not competition. Life is sharing, hoping, trusting.

In the Scriptures, being a saint is not about being good or better than someone else, it's about accepting God's judgment of grace. It's good to be human with all our frailties and incompleteness. God's love enfolds us and surrounds us with freedom, life, and love. This is the victory feast of which we sing during the hymn of praise on festival Sundays. The Feast of Victory for our God sung in the Book of Revelation. Christ, the worthy lamb who was slain, his blood sets us free to be people of God. Christ is everything good and desirable. The lamb who was slain has begun his reign.

On this feast of All Saints we celebrate our freedom with Lazarus and all the saints—set free by the King who reigns first from the Cross so that he might give us freedom in resurrection--freedom to love as we have been loved freely.

Let us accept with all the saints, the holy judgment of God that we are beloved children of Grace. Amazing holy creatures as God has made us. Holy dust. We are they to whom God has spoken as Jesus spoke of Lazarus, "Unbind him, let him go!"

Indeed, we have been unbound and set free by the true word of the Gospel of mercy. Let us live as true saints in that reality.

Thanks be to God. Amen.