

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



All Saints' to Advent 2012

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, “Samuel! Samuel” The voice of God boomed in my childhood imagination whenever I heard the story of the boy Samuel in the temple on the night in which God spoke to him. (*1 Samuel 3*) Half afraid, half curious I always wondered whether God might someday speak to me that way. Well, he never did! Anyway, not in that way. But there are moments when we can be pretty sure that God is trying to get our attention. Earlier this year a young man stayed back after Sunday Evensong to talk. He was interested in the life of Christian service to the poor and knew a thing or two about Franciscan spirituality. As we talked he referred to a book called *Tattoos on the Heart* written by a Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest who had spent some thirty years in ministry in a parish in the heart of Los Angeles’ gangland. He enthusiastically recommended the book to me. The very next morning I was visited by a man who wanted to confer about some city issue or other. In the course of our conversation he said, “Have you ever read *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Greg Boyle? I really think you would enjoy it.” OK, I got the message! That’s just too strange to be a mere coincidence. I got a copy of the book that day. In fact, my morning visitor had an extra copy and brought it around to the house later that evening. It is a God inspired little book - not a difficult read. It is basically a collection of deeply spiritual - often humorous - parables drawn from a rough and tumble urban environment. I am recommending it.

In the chapter entitled *Compassion*, Father Boyle discusses the Beatitudes. That is the name given to that portion of Jesus’ teaching which tells us about the life that is blessed. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...” (*Matthew 5:1-12*) This portion of the Gospel is traditionally read at the celebration of All Saints’ Day, I suppose, because it gathers up the essence of the good lives and the powerful witness that God’s holy men and women are called to live. Somehow in our common usage the word “blessed” seems to suggest a spiritual state of being - a goal, perhaps, to be attained. Some have assumed that we are being asked to assume a kind of saintly affectation which appears meek or peaceful or merciful or pure. Father Boyle substitutes for the word “blessed” the phrase “You’re in the right place if...” It’s more a matter of where we stand - of who and what we embrace - than it is a state of being. Being in the right place is to be where Jesus is.

Jesus is all compassion. He did not come to pity us - to feel sorry about our sordid human condition. Neither did he come to have empathy - to feel our pain. He came to embrace

us - all that we are and all that we have. He did not just pronounce the leper healed, but he reached out to touch the gruesomely diseased skin. (*Matthew 8:1-4*) He did not just absolve tax collectors and other outcasts of their wrong doing. He sat and ate with them, lowering his esteem in the eyes of upright people. (*Matthew 9:9-13*) The truth is that he hung out with all the wrong people. He broke down barriers, expanded the boundaries, and reached out to people in every condition. When he teaches his disciples and the gathered crowd how good it is to "be in the right place" he clearly lays before us conditions or activities that are sometimes awkward, uncomfortable or unpleasant - mourners, the meek, peacemakers, persecuted for righteousness sake. He is making it pretty plain that this "blessedness" goes beyond feeling good. So if it does not feel good, why do it? Why try to be where Jesus is? Where is the "blessing" in that? It is simply this - to be with Jesus. To know that he is there with us and we with him. Really, what more could we want? This is the right place to be - well and truly.

The holy men and women who are God's saints are defined not so much by their capacity to be perfect - to never slip up - as they are defined by their willingness to be in the good place where Jesus is. At our best, this is what draws Christians onward. St. Augustine, the fifth century bishop and theologian of the Latin Church in North Africa, wrote with passion in his *Confessions* of having tasted God, having hungered and thirsted for him, having been touched by him and yet continuing to burn for his peace. In Jesus Christ our God is so close, so intimate, and so real, and yet we cannot fully grasp him. He draws us further and further on, deeper and deeper into the mystery of his all embracing love. He has, as St. Augustine says, pierced our hearts with the arrow of his love, and we want more. If this blinding love of God draws us on in our life of faith, it also leads us to the conviction that this love is the ultimate reality of the universe.

"Jesus is Lord." This is the earliest confession of faith for the Christian movement. The term "lord" in the first century context was no idle expression. There were plenty of lords and kings about, and most of them held serious authority and had power to interfere in everyone's life. To suggest that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords was to make a truly radical claim - a claim which got many early Christians executed for sedition. Kings and lords are often not well pleased to hear that there is someone over them! For believers, however, it is our great joy that "the Lord our God the Almighty reigns." (*Revelation 19:6*) It's a reason to shout "Alleluia!" To know that the last word in all things will be spoken by the One who stretched out his arms of love on the wood of the cross that he might draw all to himself is a wonderful and liberating thing. It is the sum of all that God has spoken to us. The whole of creation is good and God is love.

So far this year Camden city has duplicated its record number of murders. The violence mostly involves young men and women ages 18 to 30. The reasons are usually senseless - revenge and disrespect. While not all of our young are involved in the violence, way too many are encouraged to think of it as somehow glamorous. What goes on in our back streets is in many ways related to the moral failings of our whole society. Too many are pushed to the margins - dismissed as not genuinely human or worthy of consideration. Many who are comfortably supplied with worldly goods adopt an "I've-got-mine" attitude and cease to worry about anyone else. And of course there are those at the top who bask in privilege, confident that all the world belongs to them by right. All of the corruption and disappointment offered by the world would seem to make mockery of our belief that Jesus is Lord and has the whole world in his hand.

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and

believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14, 15) The teaching of Jesus began with a proclamation of God's kingdom. In fact, the coming kingdom was the main focus of Jesus' message. The faithful knew that God's kingdom would involve a general restitution. Wrongs would be made right. Adjustments would be made to restore justice and usher in a time of peace. "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." (from the Song of Mary, Luke 1:52, 53) The horribly lopsided world of today is not yet the image of the kingdom. Those of us who long for his presence and celebrate his Lordship are faced with disappointments and serious hard work to make a dent in injustice and the lack of peace. Life bombards us with too many things which are not good - mourning, persecution, a lack of peace, justice and righteousness. But it precisely in the midst of the real world that we experience what Jesus offers as blessing - of being in the right place.

You are in the right place if you are wounded because some are left out or pushed aside. You are in the right place you weep for the world and its people. You are in the right place if you stick your neck out to bring about genuine peace. You are in the right place if you are persecuted for hanging out with all the wrong people. You are in the right place because that is the same place where Jesus is. To be sure the kingdom of God is not here yet. Even in the best of times our world does not even come close. We have marred its beauty too much with our greed and fear. But Jesus is Lord! His kingdom - a day of justice and peace - is coming. When we surrender to the ways of the kingdom and open our hearts to all those for whom Jesus' heart burns we are brought into his presence, and that blessing is ours - right here, right now.

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