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## **“Saints Among Us”**

**A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas**

**All Saints’ Sunday (Year C)**

**November 6, 2016**

**Luke 6:20-31; Ephesians 1:11-23**

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Our country is deeply divided. You know it. I know it. The world knows it. Our 2016 pre-election political division reflects our deep overall divisions in many areas. We are divided over the issues—immigration, abortion, trade, education, taxation, prison reform, marriage. We are divided by our view of race and whether we believe racial injustice is a reality or not. We are divided over the best way to bring jobs to those who are unemployed. Members of our two main political parties stand on either side of a great chasm and point fingers at the other side, each accusing the other of wrongdoing, of ignorance and arrogance, of blindly following a corrupt leader, of leading our nation to destruction with a vote for evil. Members of each side stare at those on the other side of the chasm and are flummoxed by their beliefs and stances. We are so divided that we can’t even talk about this election with those we love who are on the other side. This week a good friend of mine admitted that her mother is on the other side of the chasm from her and they can’t talk about politics at all. A close relative of mine won’t talk to her son about this. I won’t talk to my cousins about it. My grandparents, both saints to me and so many others, wouldn’t be on the same side of the chasm if they were alive today. Most of us have family members and many of us have friends on the other side of the chasm—people we love dearly who cannot, we fear, understand reason, who seem to take the same information we have and process it completely differently and end up in a radically different place. Those we call sisters and brothers in Christ stand solidly on two different sides and cannot begin to understand the point-of-view of the other.

Surely we know that something is wrong with this picture! Something in our nation is deeply, deeply broken.

I wonder what would happen if we could peel back the layers of distrust, animosity, self-righteousness, and name-calling that have built up between the two sides of this great political divide. I wonder what would happen if we took the candidates out of the picture and just tried to look at the folks on the other side of the chasm and understand what made them pick that side to stand on. Are they afraid? Afraid of losing power? Afraid of the unknown? Afraid of change? There are poor on each side. There are wealthy on each side. Both sides have vilified the other and separated themselves from them and, in too many cases, removed the image of God from the face of the other. Is that fair? Is that right? Is that how Christ would have us be toward one another?

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which Amy read for us, Paul writes to this early Christian community reminding them that they have been marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, that is, they have been baptized, and they are a part of the community of Christ, the saints who have been promised an eternal inheritance. Paul also reminds them (and us) that Christ is at the center of the church, the center of our lives. Christ is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come, when the saints will feast at table together in God's heavenly kingdom.

“This is an important reminder [writes Gennifer Brooks] because too often we act as though we are subject to the powers of this world. As Christians, we are subject to Christ, who is the head of the church and the focus of our faith.”<sup>1</sup> This can be easy to forget, especially when the world seeks to convince us that earthy powers deserve our allegiance—powers such as wealth, or position, or winning.

By the end of Tuesday this week, one side of the chasm will be celebrating their victory, while the other side will be mourning their defeat and fearful of what that defeat means for the future. But no matter what happens, no matter what side of the chasm you are on, if you are a follower of Christ, there is no fear. By God's

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<sup>1</sup> Dale P. Andrews, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen, Eds, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year C*, Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, “All Saints' Day,” (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 462.

amazing act of grace for all of us who are undeserving, we are promised ultimate victory over sin and death, ultimate victory over evil. We are called to follow Christ and we are called to live in hope—always—to live in hope—because Christ is our center and Christ is our King.

Preacher Michael Lindvall tells the story of a book he once read by a popular religious writer. As he flipped through the book, he found pages and pages of pictures, diagrams and charts mapping out the message of the written word. He writes:

They showed stick figures in various poses, arrows pointing this way and that, and assorted interlocking circles. It laid out Christianity like ninth-grade geometry. Early in the book the author proffered two diagrams to show the “before” and “after” of conversion to faith. Both had a simple throne at the center of the drawing. In the “before” version, a stick figure is perched on the throne, its feet dangling off the ground and a too-large crown set above its head. Around the throne is a circle of other stick figures, all oriented toward the throne at the center. An arrow points to the figure at the center identifying it as “YOU.” In the “after” diagram, a cross now wearing the crown is set above the throne, which is surrounded by a circle of stick people, one of whom, no larger than the others, is pointed out by an arrow as “You.” I remember [writes Lindvall] a sophisticated smirk crossing my face as I turned to the next page. “Such naiveté,” I thought to myself all those years ago. Such simplicity indeed. Unforgettable simplicity. I threw the book away thirty years ago, but I can still see the drawings on that page as if they had been printed like film on the back of my eyeballs.<sup>2</sup>

These images, though simple, speak powerful truth to us. The first represents the message of the world, putting the individual in the center—lonely, afraid, lost, desperate to hold onto that centrality and illusion of power. The second diagram places in the center not the individual, but the empty cross of power and the humble crown of thorns—Christ the King. Jesus comes to us and redeems us from that initial center position, and we are freed to join our brothers and sisters, hearts

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<sup>2</sup> Lindvall, *A Geography of God*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 25-6.

and hands joined in love as we, together, turn our faces to our true center—our creator, redeemer and sustainer, our one true God.

In this new diagram, the world looks radically different. There is no longer a chasm, for all are joined in a circle, oriented toward Christ, who is the center. Rather than vilification, the circle represents reconciliation. As people of the circle who have our eyes on Christ, we walk and work together—side by side. In our baptism, in God’s claim up on us, we are called to keep our hearts and minds focused on God in Christ Jesus, to live our lives not to glorify ourselves, or to glorify another human, but to glorify God. And we glorify God by loving God and loving one another.

Frederick Buechner reminds us of the power of love and hope and community found in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. He writes:

When we return to our pews after receiving Communion, sometimes we watch the faces of others returning to theirs. Some of them are the faces of friends or family faces that we know better than any other faces in the world. Some of them are the faces of strangers or near strangers. Some of them are faces that our hearts go out to, and some of them are faces that seem to shut us out as for no good reason our hearts seem to shut them out. But to watch them as they come back up the aisle is at least from time to time, by God’s grace, to see them all, friends and stranger alike, as human beings bound on the same . . . journey that we are bound on, full of all the same hopes and misgivings, the same longings and memories, the same fears about tomorrow and confusion about today that also fill us. And when such times come, it is possible as we watch them move past us, I think, to reach out to them in our hearts and to wish them enormously well as though even the strangers among them are as precious to us as the people we have known longest and loved best in all the world.<sup>3</sup>

On this day, we also walk forward to the table where Christ will meet us in bread and cup. We come, anticipating the heavenly banquet where all will be gathered by

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<sup>3</sup> Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 165-6.

grace. Walking with us will be the saints who have gone before. Walking with us are those on the other side of the chasm. We give thanks, as Paul does, that by the power of Christ we are strengthened as a community of faith to stand against the powers of the world which seek to turn us against one another.

I heard a story once that described Heaven and Hell. Hell, the story goes, consists of people who have no elbow joints sitting at a table full of incredible food and starving because they cannot get the food to their mouths. Heaven, it seems, is full of people who also have no elbow joints, and who also sit at a table full of sumptuous food, but who are talking and laughing and feasting on the bounty before them. The difference? I imagine you can guess. The people in Heaven are feeding each other.

Oh, that we might do the same here on earth.

May God be with us, saints, sinners, and all.

To God be the glory. Amen.

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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