

Teddy Knight
All Saints' Day, November 1, 2009
Retirement Sermon

Good Shepherd Berkeley

Psalm 149:

Hallelujah: Sing to the lord a new song
Sing his praises in the congregation of the faithful.

Let Israel rejoice in her maker.
Let the children of Zion be joyful in their king

Let them praise his name in the dance;
Let them sing praise to him with timbrel and harp.

For the Lord takes pleasure in his people
And adorns the poor with victory.

Let the faithful rejoice in triumph
And let them be joyful in their beds.

Let the praises of God be in their throat
And a two-edged sword in their hands

To wreak vengeance on the nations
And punishment on the peoples

To bind their kings in chains
And their nobles with links of iron

To inflict on them the judgement decreed
This is glory for all his faithful people. Hallelujah!

Sirach: Wisdom of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 44:1-10. 13-14

Let us now sing the praises of famous men
Our ancestors in their generations.

The lord apportioned to them great glory,
His majesty from the beginning.

There were those who ruled in their kingdoms
And made a name for themselves by their valor;
Those who gave counsel because they were intelligent;
Those who spoke in prophetic oracles.

Revelations 7:2-4, 9-17:

I saw an angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to manage earth and sea, saying "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.

After this I looked and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying:

Salvation belongs to our God
Who is seated on the throne,
And to the Lamb.

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing:

Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
And thanksgiving and honor and power and might
Be to our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these robed in white, and where have they come from? I said to him: Sir, you are the one who knows. Then he said to me: These are they who have come out of the great ordeal. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God,

And worship him day and night within his temple
And the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them
They will hunger no more and thirst no more;
The sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;
For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd
And he will guide them to the springs of the water of life
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Matthew 5:1-12:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.

Blesses are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Today's lessons are highly inspirational, but the messages are definitely mixed. There are as many ways of being saints as there are of being human. Anyone looking for a one-size fits all model of behavior is going to be disappointed.

Sirach was writing for Jews after the return from the Babylonian captivity, Jews whose parents had made the transition from being Persian slaves to being Greeks and world citizens. Now the children and grandchildren wanted to learn how to be Jews in Jerusalem. So Sirach teaches them: Honor the wisdom and virtue of the past. Follow in the way of those were leaders and inspiration to our parents. Look to the heroes recorded in the ancient documents.

The psalmist urges us to Change! Revolution! Upend the old verities! Sing a new song. Subvert the dominant paradigm. Seize the joy, dance and sing, and if you must fight, do it to destroy the kings and nobles who have been our oppressors and to bring the benefits of victory to the poor and downtrodden.

Jesus, in the group of saying known as the beatitudes, offers still other models and roles. His approach reminds me of a newspaper columnist from the 1920s, who published the writings of Archie and Mehitabel. Archie was a cockroach and Mehitabel an alley cat. Archie's motto was "I see things from the underside." Jesus sees things from the under side. He is not talking to the victorious, the ambitious, those who are living well and want to live better. He is talking to the marginal, the outsiders, the ones who don't fit into the traditional models of successful living, those whose contacts with the powerful usually consisted in trying to avoid notice.

Different models of living in Christ, many different ways of being part of the saving work of God.

Just as these different orientations pull the secular world apart, they pull individuals apart. The transition from being the radical youth to being the conservative parent, from being the rebel against the organization to being part of the organization, has overtaken almost everyone in my generation.

These differing and often contradictory values also pull the church, that is us, the sometimes organized but usually disorganized people of God, apart. And these are not just differences of opinion, or of political alignment. They are very deep differences in feelings and in the ways of being and doing, the whole gestalt which gives meaning to our lives.

I am not going to try to smooth out the differences, to reconcile the opposites, to make it all one single theme or picture. Instead, with thanks to Peggy Moore for her insight, and with a new appreciation of a metaphor from Paul, courtesy of Bill Countryman, I am going to ask you to think about your own saintliness, as we are all, in the usage of the early church, saints. Paul uses the metaphor of *mysterion*, God's plan. Now *mysterion* does not mean something hidden or secret, like a mystery in English. It means an architect's drawing, the floor plan of a building, the sketch or outline of what can be built up to replace what is now visible and solid. Peggy told us that the laws, such as what we call the 10 commandments, are not complete statements, like traffic laws -- the speed limit is 65, stop at a red light. They are items in an outline, the title of an essay, themes for meditation and reflection. It takes thought and life experience to see the implications, or to apply them to our lives. For example, thou shalt not kill includes what we call character assassination -- gossip, misrepresentation, speaking ill of others. Stealing includes all kinds of fraud and deceptive business practices, and also includes charging excessive interest. So what we are looking at is a framework -- a canvas to fill in with patterns of brightly colored threads, or a bunch of dots on a paper which can be connected in many different ways to make pictures.

This is a way to look at the future, both near term and longer term, which we are living into, minute after minute. We had drawn one picture, and it was beautiful, and it was exciting, and it aroused love and loyalty and encouraged us to grow and become more and more like the kind of people we saw ourselves as in that picture. Now we are being asked to turn the page, to go to a new blank sheet, where we are once again just a bunch of dots and bunches of colored threads, and make a new picture -- it may be very similar to the old picture, but it will have different people in it, and different ways to blend the colors, and different ways to grow and new ways, new people, to love. The temptation of the sermonizer, at this point, is to give lots of examples, to try to spellbind you with words instead of letting your mind hear and your spirit reflect. So I am going to leave this sermon unfinished, as we are all unfinished, we are all works in progress, in the hope, the assurance that we will continue growing in the saintliness we own and in adding other people, other virtues, other gifts, to our picture. Good Shepherd has always been a work in progress, and the people who are attracted to Good Shepherd are ones who are on a spiritual journey, who are also works in progress, rejoicing that we have found other people who will help us grow and whom we can befriend as we continue our journeys. For the lamb will lead us to the waters of life so we do not tire, and we will sing our new song as we compose it on the journey.