

All Saint's Year A
St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena

Rev. 7.9-17
Psalm 34.1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-7
Matthew 5:1-12

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are ... Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." (1 John 3:1-2)

Since we were last here, the colors have changed. Not just outside, but also inside, we see white. Most of the year, we see green or blue or purple, and when we see white in this space, we recognize it as the color of pure celebration. Can you remember which seasons do we mark with the color white? (At Christmas, we celebrate that God has come to share our life and to be with us in Christ. And at Easter, we celebrate the gift of life that overcomes even death.) Now, on All Saint's Day -- we celebrate the gift of God's life that people we have loved have carried with them and shared with the world. Today, this space is marked off for remembering those we love and see no longer, even though sometimes, the pain of their absence makes it hard to feel like celebrating.

Today, we especially remember saints: people who've loved God and God's world so well, so joyfully, so courageously that they expand our own capacity to imagine how God must call us to live and to love. As Rowan Williams says, "Faith has a lot to do with the simple fact that there are trustworthy lives to be seen, that we can see in some believing people a world we'd like to live in." (Rowan Williams. *Tokens of Trust*, 22). For me, one of these saints is my 95 year old grandfather, a retired pastor who lives alone and is relatively healthy. Every day, he goes to the nursing home down the street from his house as a chaplain to visit the "old people" who live there. He has this unshakeable conviction that God has called him to visit his neighbors every day at the nursing home, to be with them, to listen to them for as long as it takes. For more than a decade, I've seen him live with this quiet belief that his presence at the nursing home matters. His choice to go every day has expanded my sense of what God might be calling me to with similar faithfulness; it has challenged me to believe that there may be places where my presence matters too. That's how the saints touch and expand our lives.

Today (at 10:15), Owen Harris and Elena Jaynes will be baptized. They will be welcomed into this family where the saints – those who have gone before and alongside us - challenge us to grow in love, in hope, and in faith. Traditionally, we think of godparents as the folks with responsibility for helping Elena and Owen to grow. But in a few moments [or, at the 10:15 liturgy, our congregation] we will all promise to support Owen and Elena in their life of faith. Owen and Elena have godparents, but their godparents aren't going to be in this congregation every

Sunday like you and I are, so whenever we see Owen and Elena, we “fill in” for their godparents. We have the privilege of greeting them every time they walk through these doors, making this a place that feels to them like home. So, before they are baptized this morning (even though they are not being baptized at this service), I wonder: what does it mean for us, what will it mean for their godparents to support Owen and Elena as they grow in faith?

First, when Owen and Elena are baptized, we will pass their godparents a lit candle. Our job, [and your job, godparents,] is to hold the light. Scripture reminds us that – no matter how old we are, our capacity for perceiving the truth is limited: Paul writes, “now we see as in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face; now I know in part, then I will know fully, even as I am fully known”(1 Cor. 13.23). In the 1st century, in the years just after Jesus was with the people of God, John the Evangelist was already reminding God’s people of one the truths we lose sight of all the time; that Elena and Owen will forget occasionally as they grow, “Beloved, we are God’s children now...” He seems to say, “have you already forgotten?” “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; **and that is what we are.**” When they are baptized, Owen will come out of the water, then Elena will come out of the water and I will take some oil and will say to each of them: “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” *You are sealed. Forever.* A seal is an image set into wax. That cannot be moved around or altered: it is there permanently.

There was a family in my last parish who – when their kids were small - told them that the chrism, the oil which was traced onto our heads in baptism stays there forever: you can’t rub it off and you can’t wash it off and it never comes off. So at bedtime, they would trace that cross and they told their kids that, most people don’t know this, but that cross glows in the dark. At night, God looks down and sees those glowing crosses, sees God’s beloved children and overflows with love. Your job, [godparents,] is to hold a candle to that cross that will never go away, to remind Elena and Owen as they grow that they belong to God no matter what. There will be moments and seasons when Owen will believe that he is not articulate enough, not accomplished enough, not lovable enough; there will be moments when Elena will be sure that she is not worthy or not capable enough. Elena and Owen will lose sight of the unshakable truth that they are beloved children of God, and our job is to make this a place where, every time they walk in, they are reminded that there is nothing they can do, there is nowhere they can go to take the love of God away. Godparents, through your presence and occasionally your words, you will shed light on that truth for Owen and Elena, especially when that truth becomes hard to see, hard to remember.

As we hold that candle, the second thing we do when we come together, is to shed light on these kids’ imaginations; to shed light, not only on who these kids are now (children of God), not only on what the world is like now, but also on what could be in their lives and in the world. Two summers ago, I was in Whitefish helping with a Day Camp and about thirty kids were gathered to listen as I told about Mother Theresa of Calcutta. You know the story, of course, that Theresa

saw a woman dying in the street with rats crawling on her, and she imagined that God might be calling her to give that woman – and others like her - a holy death. So, Mother Theresa -- this tiny lady, picked that woman up and carried her to a hospital...which turned both exhausted women away. So Theresa cared for that woman herself. She fed people who were hungry, and sat with lepers and wiped the flies out of the eyes of people who were dying in the street, even when she couldn't change the reality that they were dying. When I finished telling about Mother Theresa and was putting my things away, this throng of middle school girls came up to me and said, "is this really true? Did she really live?" They had never heard of her! And they asked if they could borrow the picture I had brought of Mother Theresa and went into a corner with clipboards, and made pencils sketches of Mother Theresa's face, framed by her sari, to take home, to remember how courageously Theresa loved even when others couldn't love back.

As Elena and Owen grow, it will be so easy for them to accept the ways things are in our world; the injustices that surround us and feel inevitable. But Mother Theresa's story sparked the imagination of these girls from Whitefish, so that they have concrete actions and a human life to think of when they hear Jesus' words from the mountain: "Blessed are the merciful." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." They know what mercy looks like. Part of our role in Elena's and Owen's lives is to make this a place where their imagination is sparked, where the door to new possibilities is open as they imagine what it means to hunger and thirst for righteousness, for the to make peace. In this place, and in our company, they will recognize alternative ways of living as a viable possibility for God's people in our world.

If those stories are to shape our imaginations, we need to hear them and wonder and pray about what they might mean more than just once a week. How many hundreds of times, how many years of hearing and wondering about and imagining these stories must take place before we begin to ask ourselves: "Who is my neighbor?" "What might it mean for me to seek peace and pursue it?" Over time, as we keep imagining, we will start to see what was not visible before: that in the family of God, habits of life as courageous and faithful as those of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, and St. Francis of Assisi, and Ruth the Moabite are possible. This is a place and we are a people amongst whom Elena and Owen will imagine new possibilities for life, so hold that candle so that we can see the thresholds we might cross. But: don't get too serious! In the family of God, the work of imagination is always playful; exploring possibilities, wondering about what could be, joking, laughing. So [godparents, your] our job is to play with these children, and shed light on the possibility of a world that is not defined by the status quo; where new doors, portals are visible as we hunger and thirst for righteousness.

As you hold that candle, [godparents,] you will also shed light on the water: the ordinary stuff. Water, which we washed our hands with this morning, and used to make coffee, and brush our teeth: that is a tangible reminder that God is at work in our lives. God's grace, God's undeserved gifts are not moments of magic; they are always poured out on us through the ordinary things of creation: through gifts of bread, wine, water, oil, human touch, prayer. In the family of

God, that's what we have to work with, that's all the saints have had to work with; that's all Elena and Owen will have to work with as they seek to extend God's grace to others: water, bread, wine, human touch, oil, prayer. Godparents, your job will be to continue to illuminate, shed light on those raw materials. When we think about Jesus' words calling us to extend mercy, imagining what it might mean to mourn with those who mourn, considering how we might make peace, we must remember this: if our effort to make peace doesn't bring people together to a table to share a meal or bread and wine, if our work to show mercy doesn't offer a cool cup of water to those who thirst, if we are not extending human touch, maybe we are missing the point. So hold the candle, help us to see God in the essentials and take up the habit of offering a human touch where it is longed for, to share a meal, to trace the oil, on someone else's head.

On this day of pure celebration we give thanks for people who've helped us to see what is not always visible to us: God's limitless love, possibilities for mercy and peace in our world just through the doorway, the ordinary things that mediate God's grace every day. Today we pray for presence of mind to hold the candle, to hold the light even in dark moments and places, so that those around us might catch a glimpse and cast a vision for the truth that, "we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed..."