

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year C
11/6/16
The Feast of All Saints
Luke 6:20-31

“May you live in interesting times,” says the old Chinese curse. And the times we’re living in right now are about as “interesting” as they get, if by “interesting” we mean dismaying, anxious, uncertain. And those are the milder adjectives. “Election Fatigue Syndrome” I’ve heard it described, and I think that about captures it. Did you know that this election day is as late on the calendar as it could possibly be? Federal law provides that presidential elections are to be held on the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November. This year that first Monday is tomorrow. So we wait until November 8. And in other years, we would say to ourselves, whether our preferred candidates win or lose, Wednesday will come and we’ll get back to normal. In this “interesting” year, on the other hand, there is a sense abroad that Wednesday will simply see a continuation of the rancor, the bitterness, the polarization that is plaguing our culture these days. More and more, it seems, we are dividing ourselves into warring tribes, and these tribes often don’t speak to each other so much as they curse each other.

This kind of tribalism, an “us” versus “them,” good guys versus bad guys, “I’m right and you’re wrong,” way of being in the world is really the curse of these “interesting times” we’re living in. If you find yourself wondering, “Come Wednesday, how then shall we live?” you have lots of company.

So it’s a beautiful bit of synchronicity that this Sunday before the most divisive and rancorous election in recent memory, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. It’s a day on the Church calendar where we’re called to celebrate what unites us and get over all that divides us. We’re reminded of what Scripture calls the mighty cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints, those whose faith is known to us and those whose faith is known to God alone, who have preceded us in life and in death and who are now rejoicing in another country, a heavenly country, at home in the heart of God.

Do you know that by virtue of our baptisms, you and I enjoy dual citizenship? That’s right. We are citizens of this great republic and we are also citizens of another country, a heavenly country. Speaking of our ancestors in faith like Abraham, and Moses, the Epistle to the Hebrews observed:

“All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are

seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.”

That’s right. As Christians, we are citizens of another country. And what are the marks of our Christian citizenship?

We hear Jesus telling us about what it really means to be his follower in this morning’s gospel reading. It comes from the Sermon on the Plain. We are more familiar with Jesus making a similar statement in Matthew’s gospel called the Sermon on the Mount, but in Luke, Jesus is described as speaking to his disciples on a plain, a low place. And like so much else in Luke’s gospel, the Sermon on the Plain is all about reversals.

The poor will be blessed and lifted up. Those who look to their wealth for salvation will experience woes. The weak and the vulnerable are lifted up, the arrogant and the mighty will be taught humility. This is what that heavenly country looks like. The status quo will get a big shaking up. And then Jesus says something that is so important for us Christians, we who have this dual citizenship, at this particular “interesting” moment in our history.

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. **Do unto others as you would have them do to you.**”

Now that’s countercultural. And of course we hear it all the time. “Love your enemies.” But what does that even mean. “OK, here I am. Loving my enemies.” Does anything happen? It’s pretty abstract, right? Jesus gets this and then takes a next step. “Love your enemies and do something about it.” Do good and compassionate work. Bless them. Pray for them. Will that change your enemy? Who knows. But what Jesus knows is that it will change you. Doing good for someone you’re in conflict with, blessing them, praying for them, all these things may not change their hearts, but it will change yours. Asking for and praying for those we are in conflict with, draws us closer to Christ. And the closer we draw to Christ, the more open our hearts become, the more charitable our hearts become. As we draw closer to Christ, we are better able to see our enemies for who they really are. Our enemies are beloved of Christ just as we are.

Let me tell you a story about a man named Will Campbell. He was a preacher and a devout believer, but Campbell claims he was not really a Christian until his friend Jonathan Daniels was murdered in 1966. Daniels was a young theology student from the Episcopal seminary in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who had gone down to Lowndes County, Alabama, to register African Americans to vote. On August 14, 1965, Daniels was one of a group of 29 protesters, including members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who went to Fort Deposit, Alabama to picket its whites-only stores. All of the protesters were arrested and taken to jail in the nearby town of Hayneville. The police released five juvenile protesters the next day. The rest of the group was held for six days; they refused to accept bail unless everyone was bailed.

Finally, on August 20, the prisoners were released without transport back to Fort Deposit. After release, the group waited near the courthouse jail while one of their members called for transport. Daniels with three others—a white Catholic priest and two black female activists—walked to buy a cold soft drink at nearby Varner’s Cash Store, one of the few local places to serve non-whites. But barring the front was Tom L. Coleman, an unpaid special deputy who was holding a shotgun and had a pistol in a holster. Coleman threatened the group and leveled his gun at seventeen-year-old Ruby Sales. Daniels pushed Sales down and caught the full blast of the shotgun. He was instantly killed.

Campbell got news of Daniel’s death while he was visiting his friend P. D. East, the colorful and defiant editor of the Petal, Mississippi, newspaper called *The Petal Paper*. It was East, years before, who had badgered Campbell into giving him a definition of the Christian message in ten words or less. “We’re all bastards, but God loves us anyway,” East recalled. “Let’s see if your definition of faith can stand the test. Was Jonathan Daniels a bastard?”

Campbell was still in shock and deeply grieving for his friend. Mainly to get East to shut up, Campbell admitted that Jonathan was a bastard.

“Was Thomas Coleman a bastard?” East asked

It was easy enough to agree to that.

Then East pulled his chair around, put his bony hand on Campbell’s knee and, staring directly into Campbell’s glistening eyes, whispered, “Which one of these two bastards do you think God loves most?”

It was the turning point of Campbell’s life. “Suddenly everything became clear,” he recalls in his autobiography, *Brother to a Dragonfly*. “I walked across a room and opened the blind, staring directly into the glare of the street light. And I began to whimper. But the crying was interspersed with laughter.”

He was laughing at himself: At twenty years of a ministry which had become, without my realizing it, a ministry of sophistication. An attempted negation of Jesus, [A ministry] of human engineering, of riding the coattails of Caesar...of worshipping at the shrine of enlightenment and academia, of making an idol of the Supreme Court, a theology of law and order and of denying not only the Faith I professed to hold, but my history and my people – the Thomas Colemans.”

“What I like most about Will is that he does not divide the world into us versus them,” says the black scholar and writer Julius Lester, a longtime Campbell watcher. “It’s that quality that enables him to really startle people. His whole object is to affect the soul of the other, and he does that better and more directly than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

The closer we get to Christ, the barriers and the borders begin to fall away. The closer we get to Christ, the little camps we divide ourselves into and the little tribes we swear our allegiances to, begin to fall away. The world becomes more spacious, more open, our hearts become more peaceful. We can begin to see the world the way God sees it, as a beautiful tapestry, a tapestry of many colors, not just blue or not just red, if you see what I mean, but a tapestry of red and blue and a whole lot of other colors besides. This is what Dr Martin Luther King called “The Beloved Community”. And it’s what you and I were baptized into and what these three children will be baptized into in just a moment. They will take on a new identity and a new citizenship just as we each have done.

Speaking of Dr. King, he was one of our great contemporary saints and his prophetic witness is still alive and inspiring. He and his fellow Christians embodied Jesus’ words we hear this morning. Beaten, attacked, arrested, imprisoned, Dr. King always practiced a non-violent response to hatred and abuse. He and his followers truly practiced love and blessing and prayer for their enemies, the ones who meant them harm. And their witness changed the world.

So here we are, two days before this momentous election. It’s a time filled with divisiveness and anxiety, anger and fear. But as Christians, baptized into the beloved community, citizens both of a great republic and a heavenly country, we don’t have to participate in all the tribal divisions. Do we live **in** this world? We certainly do and we must take the responsibilities that come with that seriously. That’s certainly what Jesus is referring to in his list of blessings and woes. We have responsibilities to our sisters and brothers we share this planet with. Yet, Jesus is also telling us that we don’t have to be **of** this world. Our citizenship in that heavenly country offers us the possibility of living peacefully and in charity with folks who may not necessarily love us back. Our prayer would be that God will give them opportunities to come to greater consciousness and awareness of God’s purpose for their lives. But our work, our purpose, our mission is

very simple. To love. To bless. To pray. To heal. If we really take seriously the identity we put on in baptism then the anxieties of Tuesday and Wednesday and the days beyond will begin to fade. We are part of something much larger than ourselves. We are, each one of us, even the ones we don't agree with, bound for the communion of saints. We, each of us, are citizens of that heavenly country. Amen.