

Sermon on Luke 6:20-31
All Saints' Sunday, November 6, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Grace and peace to you from the God who gives us life, from Jesus Christ who has led us from death to life, and from the Spirit who gives us power through faith.

So let us begin by all taking a great, big, deep breath. Breathe in, breathe out. We have all been under a lot of stress lately. Mostly because of this present national election – not only that, but it is a big part of it. We have seen people attack one another with their words and even physically, due to the deep divide that has occurred because of the disagreements people have over the candidates and what they appear to represent. Each side has come to believe that the election of the “other side’s” candidate would bring the end to life as we know it, and usher in the *apocalypse*, encouraged by the rhetoric of the campaigns for each candidate.

But it’s not only this election that has caused us such worry and stress. We have become awakened to a lot of things about ourselves that we don’t like – such as the racial divide that has plagued us from the beginning of our nation, which continues to show itself in inequity and inequality in opportunities in education and employment, in our criminal justice system, in the incarceration of large percentages of African American males as well as other persons of color, and in the violence that we see in so many communities and homes across America. We worry about jobs, about health care for our families, about climate change, the future of our children and grandchildren, and the threat of gun violence and terrorism. Many of us even worry about what is happening in North Dakota – a state not many people in this country think about all that much, even as it is one of our closest neighbors – because of the stand-off happening at Standing Rock between police and native peoples and their allies opposing the building of the Dakota Access pipeline access pipeline over the Missouri River and sacred burial sites. Some of us have family members, colleagues and friends who have put themselves in danger over this by traveling to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. So this and many other things have kept us in ongoing tension for months – with only the briefest of respites last Wednesday for game seven of the World Series, and the lowly Chicago Cubs’ long-awaited victory over Cleveland.

So, take a deep breath; force yourself to relax. Sunday is our day of rest, between now and Tuesday, election day! Fortunately, many of us have already voted!

What I love most about All Saints’ Sunday is that it is a reminder of who we are, as well as a day of remembrance for our loved ones, and a day to focus on the reason that we have hope for the future! We remember that we are baptized in the

name of our Lord Jesus – which means that you and I and all the baptized are the “saints of the Lord”, through our baptism and our faith. (Despite our many imperfections!)

Just last Friday, I took a short break in the early afternoon to rake the last leaves in my yard at home. It has been a very busy week, with much to plan and think about in order to prepare for today’s worship plus other worship services and community events to come, plus the thoughts about this stressful political campaign that has all of us “on edge” – even clergy! I had just delivered my 92-year-old – father’s absentee ballot to city hall, and brought him his medications (which I do 3-4 times a day). So I appreciated this time to enjoy the warmth of the sun, the falling leaves, and some quiet time outside without cable tv. Then I received a phone call – it was an urgent message from the daughter of Virginia Johnson, one of our homebound members. Ginny, who had suffered a broken femur a few months ago, had taken a turn for the worse. Could I come and pray with them? Certainly, so I quickly went inside, showered and changed clothes, and hurried over to the care center. I was met by several members of Ginny’s family, gathered around her bed. Ginny opened her eyes when I said her name, and when she recognized me, she said she appreciated that I had come. She was very tired and weak, having not eaten for days. I told her we had been thinking about her and praying for her in worship, and spoke the names of some of you, her friends, who had asked about her. Then I read Psalm 121, said words of confession, forgiveness and absolution for her, and then we all said the 23rd Psalm and the Lord’s Prayer together. Then I said a benediction for her and shared the peace. After a little more conversation, Ginny fell asleep, and a bit later the members of the family one by one took their leave, and I also went home. But we all left, feeling at peace, even though we were saddened at the thought of soon losing Ginny. We had been reminded of what is important – love for one another, our families and our brothers and sisters in Christ, life and death – a reprieve from all the turmoil and strife that surrounds us in this world and in our lives. We even remarked to each other, as we left the room, that it was time to rest, stay away from television news, and speak of other, more important things.....

I tell you this to help remind you of the importance of life and death, faith, hope and love – as I was reminded of it last Friday. We know this, but we certainly get distracted easily! So the importance of this Feast of All Saints, as well as every Sunday in worship, is that it pulls our attention and focus from obsessing about the things that challenge us – which we seldom can control – and remind us of the God who created us and loved us, of Jesus who was sent by God to save us, and the Holy Spirit who gives us faith and the power to love. We have been baptized, we have been called “saints” of the Lord (sinners as well as saints, as Martin Luther reminded us), so we have been given hope in our lives for the present day and the future, despite what the world throws at us.

We hear it clearly in the scriptures we have read today. We heard it in the vision recorded in the book of Daniel, in which four great beasts representing the powerful kingdoms of Daniel's time: Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece under Alexander the Great, troubled Daniel in a dream. They were powerful beasts like the Death Eaters, Dementors and creepy characters of today's *Harry Potter* series. But the message of Daniel was that even these powerful beasts, these great kingdoms, were nothing compared to the power of God, the Most High. Even though great kings would arise from earthly powers, *"the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever."* This was the ultimate encouragement for the faithful.

The letter to the Ephesians was addressed *"to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus."* The opening to the letter speaks of how we, the faithful, have been *destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ...in whom we have redemption, forgiveness and grace...and have obtained an inheritance...and were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit...so that we, who...set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory."* The author of Ephesians had heard of their faith in Jesus and their love toward the "saints" (who were the faithful who suffered for their faith, in Jerusalem and elsewhere). The writer prayed that all the faithful will receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and know the hope to which God has called us, and the riches of Christ's glorious inheritance among the saints, for those who believe. As we all await that time, we all pray for the Spirit to produce fruits of justice and righteousness in us – which is the work of the Spirit.

And in Luke's gospel, we heard from Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain", when Jesus descended from the mountain where he prayed and called his 12 disciples, *"came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and coast of Tyre and Sidon."* This was a great mass of people, who came to hear and be healed of their diseases, who were troubled with unclean spirits seeking a cure. They were "the misfits, the poor, the original basket of deplorables" who were ignored by the powerful, yet Jesus came down to them, as they came to him out of their vulnerability. Jesus didn't deride them for their failings, scold them for misbehavior, or tell them how they must do better to follow God's Law. Jesus said, *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."* Jesus continued with "words of woe" for those who are rich, well-fed, and laughing in comfort while others suffer. That is a sermon for another day; today we focus on Jesus' words of comfort and

hope to all those who suffer – whether it is you, your neighbor, or those who are far away.

For Jesus surprises us all – not only the rich, or the poor, but everyone who reads these words – at the certainty he spoke in words of hope for everyone who suffers. It will not be forever – hunger will end in plenty, weeping will end in laughter, hate will end with joy and love. For this is God’s promise, spoken from the very mouth of Jesus, God’s Son, and we can depend on this! Jesus calls us all to faith, to have trust in the God who loves us and gives us life – and Jesus has come down to us, to give us these words of hope! In these times when we are focused so hard on this election that shows our differences and divisions, Jesus comes down to tell us not to be anxious about so many things! When we worry about the future of our children and of our parents and grandparents’ health, Jesus comes down to tell us that their future and ours is assured in God’s Kingdom. When we experience stress because of the inequities, injustice and unfairness experienced by so many in this world – sometimes experienced by us, sometimes caused by us or our leaders – Jesus comes down to tell us that God will make all things right, and bring justice and peace to this earth. When you and I experience grief and loss, worry about our lack of faith, and feel hopeless and lost, Jesus comes down to give us words of comfort, encouragement and hope – to trust in God’s mercy, and trust in him, whom God raised from the dead! We profess in our Creed today that *“for us and our salvation, Jesus came down from heaven!”*

We live today in hope, that the crucified and risen Christ, who ascended into heaven, will come again, to judge the living and the dead, and to bring God’s everlasting kingdom. In the meantime, we live in hope, with love for one another, as God has first loved us. Jesus calls you and me to *“love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you....to do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

So today, you and I are invited by Christ to step back from the anxiety and worry of these present days. For Jesus has come down to be with us, to remind us that God is present here in mercy and love, that our sins are forgiven, and to give us the promise of life everlasting. Today we light candles of hope in remembrance of our brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents, children and friends who have lived and died and in the Lord. We light the candles which we first received in baptism, which represent the light of Jesus Christ, come into this world in the midst of its darkness. We light these candles in hope and faith, knowing that Jesus our Lord has called us all to be witnesses to this light, so that all people will know the truth of the love of God and God’s justice. It is certain, and it is coming. So do not be anxious, do not be afraid, have faith, and have love for God and neighbor, just as God is faithful, and has love for you, for me, and all the world. Thanks be to God

for the encouragement and the life which we receive from the good news in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.