

# All Saints/GIFT

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera*

*The Church of St John the Evangelist*

*Sunday, November 4, 2012*

## **The Solemnity of All Saints / All Souls**

Wisdom 3:1-9, Ps. 24; Rev.21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Mark wanted to make a difference; he wanted to be counted among the righteous. Like many he thought he could live with less, more simply and generously so he signed up for the Peace Corps and was sent to Guatemala. Adapting his ways to fit in with his neighbors he was nevertheless quite conscious of being a privileged North American, he writes, with access to material goods that few people in this new community would see. Like the eight girls and three boys who lived next door, who took months to approach him and then study his things and his patterns.

It was a few months later that his mother came for a visit. Despite Mark's pleas that she bring only a very small gift for the children, her second suitcase was packed with playdoh, Lincoln logs, construction paper, scented markers, an electronic keyboard with batteries, and eight Barbie dolls. Glaring symbols of consumerism and cultural imperialism to him and just a few things to her, they entered a values war, playing out much as you would expect. There were good reasons on both sides for their actions. Mark's mother had always gone overboard on gifts, partly in reaction to a difficult childhood and later to buy loyalty and affection in the wake of a divorce. Mark and his siblings had learned that in response to an avalanche of gifts anything they offered seemed cheap and miniscule by comparison. And let's not throw in the arguments about aid and charity and self-sufficiency. When the toys were gone and other children appeared at the door asking for gifts too the points were well taken. And some of the Barbies were sold off, two lost their heads and one ended up behind glass as a modern Madonna who was sought out for blessing.

Six months later Mark and his mom were together again in Guatemala but this time she brought no bags of gifts; this time there was a new heaven and a new earth. She found ways to sit with the children and trace the alphabet in flour in a pan and ask about their lives in school. I am thinking that Mark and his mom grew in understanding of the nature of gifts and perhaps even to have a little more faith in each other. His generosity is a clear legacy of wanting to share his treasure; only this time they both shared themselves.

Today's feast day connects ancestors of spirit to the church. Those treasured lives of saints and souls remembered in this place. Believing that we are part of a gathering place for God's work we name those who have been ours, who have moved in response to God's claim on their lives. We have a sense of the light that passed through them; we know that they are those whom Walter Bruggeman calls those who know the 'primal language of other.'<sup>1</sup> Those who have been kind and generous, respecting those whose difference presents an opportunity for a meeting place with God. He also says that saints are those who do not run and hide when they smell death; they are unafraid of suffering and they stay present in love and mercy when there is dying and illness and

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<sup>1</sup> Collected Sermons, p. 206

violence. This is gifting in its deepest place and we focus for a while on the gospel where Jesus meets those who will be called to life out of death, life instead of death. At a recent concert in town Bruce Springsteen spoke of those who have gone before.. “The older you get, the more ghosts and spirits walk alongside. When you’re old they become your traveling companions; they remind me, when they walk beside me, of the preciousness of this day and how sweet life is.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the faith we are called to in GIFT and in Moving Forward. We trust our lives and our futures to God. This is how the church has always lived. The church will not live long or host the goodness and power of God unless there are a strong number of people who believe the good news of the gospel and stake their lives on the very truth of God.....I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly....what is it you want me to do for you?....your faith has made you well....come out...

Over the years in this place there have been gutsy and generous people who were determined and faithful, who were convinced that Jesus is good news. St. John’s is a place where not only personal lives count but also public lives with all the issues of poverty and discrimination, educational and housing disparities, health and ethnicity all need gifts to be offered, where new risks of faith are required. The saints, the souls that are our witness today are evidence that there is also a future where God will meet us, new thresholds to step across, new behaviors to learn. If you really think about it it takes your breath away – or gives it to you. It really is all about GIFT, about growing in faith together. Your faith shapes your vision; your action statements in the case for support are concrete and achievable. You have correctly said that not everything requires money but some things do; you have risked yourselves without a new incumbent. Perhaps that is a God thing, perhaps this is a new model of mission. This shared commitment is generous in faith, hope and love.

How well you do really reflects how well those who preceded you lived out their faith. All the deep issues of God’s mission – everywhere – remain unfinished and on some days, unsettled. You are carrying forward unfinished business from the past, those whose hope for the kingdom requires another generation to pick up what was left. No generation has been a perfect people of faith but you can determine what that history adds up to as you move ahead. “Behold, says God. I am doing a new thing.” All around us it’s about the gifts – theirs, yours, ours. Their legacy is dependent on you if it is not irrelevant or delusional.

“The promise of triumph which we celebrate today is for all of us not some collection of stained glass perfect people but rather for all of us who have lived lives of faith or even just attempted to do so.”<sup>3</sup> No one has a perfect case but all of the GIFT campaigns are about faithful cases, time to be new community in mission, with others in obedience and trust. We are in good company. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Springsteen, Bruce, The Ottawa Citizen, Oct. 20, 2012, section D

<sup>3</sup> Koester, Br. James, Brother, Give Us a Word, Nov. 1, 2012 eposting from SSJE