

All Saints' Celebration
November 3, 2019
The Rev. Emily Richards

The Great Ferris Wheel of Life

The ancient Celts believed that during this time of year, the veil between worlds became especially permeable, referring to these days as a thin place where heaven and earth seemed closer than ever, where we could reconnect with those beloved souls who had gone before us. In this one service we will welcome the newest member, Canon, into the household of the church through the waters of holy baptism while we will also pray for that great cloud of witnesses, remembering in particular those whose own lives have shaped ours. All Saints' Day is a surprising celebration where joy and sorrow, loss and expectation are intertwined, where the hope of the future and the remembrance of the past intersect and where we find our place living somewhere in between.

It is tradition that on this feast day we hear Jesus' Beatitudes – those words of blessing he shares with his disciples and the crowds. In Luke's version, Jesus has come down the mountain and has entered into the heart of the clamoring crowd, into the midst of their suffering, their sorrow, their hunger and their need not only for his healing touch, but for his words that give them the promise of new life. We often misunderstand these words of blessing, especially in the case of Luke's account, because he partners them with what are called the Woes. We hear them as commands - in terms of reward and punishment. But there is no judgment or even advice in these words. Jesus is telling it like it is. Calling it like he sees it. Not how it should be or could be if his disciples or if we were somehow better followers.

Barbara Brown Taylor reflects: "There is nothing about the beatitudes that remotely suggests Jesus was telling anyone what he thought they should do...Instead, he describes different kinds of people, hoping that his listeners will recognize themselves as one kind or another, and then he makes the same promise to all of them: that the way things are is not the way they will always be. The Ferris wheel will go around, so that those who are swaying at the top, with the wind in their hair and all the world's lights at their feet, will have their turn at the bottom, while those who are down there right now, where all they

can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust, will have their chance to touch the stars. It is not advice at all. It is simply the truth about the way things work, pronounced by someone who loves everyone on that wheel. The beatitudes tell us who we are, and more importantly, they tell us who Jesus is...Neither the going up nor the coming down is under our control, as far as I can tell," Taylor continues," but wherever we happen to be, the promise is the same. Blessed are you who loose your grip on the way things are, for God shall lead you in the way things shall be." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Boston, ©1999: 54-56).

Some gathered here this morning are at the top of the Ferris wheel with the wind in your hair and all the world's lights at your feet. And others are at the bottom where all you can see are candy wrappers in the sawdust. Some of us are filled with gratitude for this service of remembrance while others are weighed down by fresh grief, experiencing bittersweet feelings about this day. As I first scanned all the names of those listed in our leaflet whom we will remember, my heart sank for a moment. This past year we have lost so many beloved souls who brought such goodness, love and light to our community. It is hard to imagine how we will be without them. And then my heart began to lift as I thought about sweet Canon, his precious life and new life in Christ. When I pour the water over his head, I will think of his mother Jess who was baptized in this very place and all his family members who found a home in this faith community. Christ's presence made known in this place generation after generation, among the living saints and those now in the nearer presence of God.

In her reflection, *Memoirs of a Griever*, Catherine Sietkiewicz writes about dealing with her father's unexpected death. "In the 365 days that the Earth has moved around the sun, and in the 365 times the moon has risen over my sky here since my father's death, I have learned to appreciate the good in life. To savor it, to relish it when it comes my way, and to remember it when it seems so far from where I find myself. I have learned that although loss cannot truly be understood, it can be shared, and that in this process of sharing, new life, new laughter, and new love can grow." The Rev. Frank Toia is one of this congregation's newest saints who has now entered into the eternal presence of divine love. Writing to him during his illness, fellow parishioner Melissa Olson, said this: "Those who walk with us even briefly may encounter us without pretense - vulnerable, alone, afraid and disheartened. And yet in our vulnerability, our companions along the way

may also reflect back to us an equally deep and true self - beloved, bold, courageous and hopeful, a soul filled with the holy breath of life – indeed a reflection of the soul of God.” On this day where our grief and joy are intertwined, we draw encouragement from Jesus’ words, and we draw encouragement from our holy companionship with each other.

In our remembrance of those we will never stop loving or missing, we rededicate ourselves to appreciating life in its beauty and in its fragility. And in the celebration of Canon’s baptism, our belief that life goes on and so too will the community of the faithful is rekindled. We are bound to one another in our remembering and in our celebrating. We are bound to one another in our willingness to share the fullness of our lives. And in our solidarity with those companions who have gone before us and those who will come after us, that great fellowship of saints, we will all receive blessing upon blessing through the One who loves us always, no matter where we find ourselves on that great Ferris wheel, the One who promises to lead us into the way things shall be. *Amen.*