

All Saints' Day – Year A – November 6, 2011
Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
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Last Monday I went to the dentist to have a filling replaced. Of course, I'd lost the filling on the previous Friday, as I was eating some lunch. And of course, the dentist's office was already closed for the weekend. Fortunately, I wasn't in any pain and could wait, but for every one of the three days before my appointment to get it fixed, my tongue irresistibly wandered to that little hole, as if knowing that there should be something there, and craving to fill the gap.

I think God craves for us all to fill in some of the evident gaps in His kingdom. There's the poverty gap, the gaping chasm of socio-economic inequity, the abyss of injustice and oppression, and the aching hole of empty bellies, while tons of food from the richest continents is scraped into garbage dumps. Then there are the potholes of greed or selfish desires that drive us off the road. Make no mistake, God's kingdom is already here, and working throughout the world, wherever God's faithful serve Him, but our mission is not yet complete. That's just another way of saying that we are called to do the work that God has prepared for us to do. It's also part of our prayer of thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion, rightly placed just before God blesses us, and we go back out into the world strengthened in the body and blood of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Today we hear the beginning of Jesus' most famous Sermon on the Mount. The mountain setting is particularly important for Matthew in that mountains are generally the locations of divine revelations, like Moses receiving the Law on Mt. Sinai, or of Jesus' transfiguration. Despite the intended similarity, there's quite a difference between the great prophet Moses, and Jesus, the Word made flesh. Jesus takes up the attitude of a teacher, sitting down with the crowds all around Him. He then proceeds to share the most significant and surprising revelation of God's characteristics and of His own mission. He doesn't speak of conquering the world with sweeping power, but of transforming the world in love and relationship. The Sermon on the Mount is rather like Jesus' reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue from Luke's gospel, in which He defines His mission as bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor.

On Mt. Sinai, Moses *receives* God's divine Law on behalf of the Israelites, whereas Jesus confidently exercises His rightful authority to *teach* and interpret the Law for all Israel. His teaching expresses much of the reality of living in this in-between time, where the kingdom of God is present by virtue of Christ's coming, but where it is not yet fully realized. There are gaps, which have largely been filled by greed and injustice. Our mission is to continue our Lord's work of making things right according to God's will. We're called to reconcile those gaps, or even to go about removing and reversing the effects of the current fillings. As Jesus tells us, there is much poverty in the world, great wells of hopelessness and people living a joyless existence. There are many in mourning. There are millions who suffer the indignities of oppression, and privation. Jesus has good news for all who are facing great trials. The key that unlocks our ministry are our acts of mercy and compassion in Christ's name.

As we hear throughout Matthew's gospel, the divine characteristic of mercy is highly valued by Jesus, and has significant emphasis in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word 'mercy' has extensive connotations, and as the Body of Christ, we're equipped to participate fully in each aspect of continuing Jesus' mission. For example, exercising mercy includes forgiving the sins of others and sharing our resources generously with the poor. Mercy also means healing the sick, and releasing those who are imprisoned, in any way, be it physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Twice in Matthew, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In Matthew 9:10-13, mercy is used in the context of healing when Jesus eats with the sinners and tax collectors. It is also used in Matthew 12:7, in the context of feeding those who are hungry. God always works holistically. Each divine characteristic is always at play. God is perfect love, goodness, mercy and compassion, as well as our perfect judge. In the same way, our healing in body,

mind, and spirit is an integral part of our salvation, and everlasting life in Him.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are the fullest embodiment of God's greatest gift, revelation, and mission of reconciliation with His people, and with all creation. Therefore, it follows that the mission of Jesus is also embodied and lived out by those who call Him Lord. Our commitment to Christ makes you and me disciples of our Lord Jesus. The multiple facets of discipleship include studying at the feet of our Lord by reading and learning together from Scripture. An essential element of discipleship is staying grounded in our Lord through prayer, and deepening our relationship with God in Christ through worship in community. As we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we are equipped and empowered to serve one another, and to serve the world in His name.

Realistically, there are only a few saints like St. Paul, who are so gifted that they can be all things to all people. Usually, we discover that together as a community of faith, our spiritual gifts complement and complete those of others. In that way, we can, through our various ministries, offer Christ's love and hope to the dispossessed and abandoned people of the world. There are also those amongst us who are especially gifted in pastoral care, and can offer great comfort to those who literally mourn. As usual with Jesus' teachings, these blessings have great depth and layers of meaning, which open up greater possibilities for our acts of love and mercy. In another sense of the word mourning, there are some amongst us who are particularly sensitive to the fact that evil, greed, or injustice has moved in to try to fill the place of God's goodness and love in so many areas of our lives. I know my friend, Janice, is literally moved to tears at the fact that schisms in the church have torn apart the Body of Christ, and continue to divide Christians one from another. Others are filled with sorrow and a heartfelt longing to right what is wrong, and to bring Christ's healing to bear for the sake of this world.

Here's an example from our wonderful array of ministries, one distinctly appropriate to what we call First Fruits Sunday. Each time we reach out to our neighbors by offering food items for the Love Kitchen, we're helping to alleviate the literal hunger and thirst in the world in favor of God's righteousness. God's righteousness is fundamentally about justice for all. Divine justice demands that we share God's abundant gifts as all have need. In that way, we express our kingdom values, where everyone has precisely what he or she needs. There is no poverty of homelessness in God's kingdom. Every man, woman and child has enough. Not too much, and not too little. We do this at the local level by giving a food to the Love Kitchen. We do this at an international level by supporting the Tanzanian feeding station initiated by our partner in ministry, Faith Works. These are tangible ways in which we're participating in Christ's mission, and enlarging God's kingdom. These are all tangible ways of meeting needs, and filling gaps, by reflecting God's merciful and compassionate character in our own lives, through what we say and what we do.

As we are equipped for mission through our common gathering in worship, including participating with saints past and present in the Great Thanksgiving feast, we're also transformed. In offering ourselves to God by worshipping the Lord, we are surrendering our self-centeredness. We become more aware of all our blessings, and become more Christ-centered. As we worship the Lord, our lives and that of this community become more focused. We are empowered for humble service in Christ's name. Deepening our relationship with God in Christ Jesus fills us with His love, peace, and joy, which in turn flows through us and floods the world with light and hope. You and I are truly blessed, because we have the joy of blessing the world with the knowledge and love of God in Christ Jesus. As the saints of this generation, we have the incredible honor of sharing our God-given gifts to fill those niggling gaps of pain and hunger, of corruption and oppression, with the blessed gifts of God's merciful healing and salvation. Now **that** is worth celebrating!

Amen.