

All Saints' Day – Year A – November 2, 2008
Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12
Susan E. Wilmot

In customer service and in many other areas of our lives, there is a well-known maxim: perception is everything. In fact, our individuality is at its most obvious when you talk to two different people who experience precisely the same event and yet have completely opposite opinions about it. The beauty of our humanity is that we have a highly complex cognitive system beyond the purely instinctive or the purely rational. In other words, we are not like Data from the *Star Trek TNG* series who functions completely rationally when he doesn't have his emotion chip engaged, and much more humanlike or emotionally when he does. Yet we are still surprised when people or things are not quite what or who they seem to be.

Now I am sure you have heard of the phrase "don't kill the messenger". Many a true word has been spoken in jest, and when I was in business I often felt like that messenger. I worked for a number of years managing the voice of the customer. In practice that entailed soliciting and sharing external customer feedback with several internal customers, who were responsible for providing a variety of services. The web of relationships was inter-dependent, one department depending on another to ensure an overall level of service, while the customer was dependent on the transportation of their product to meet their own customers' needs. On the one hand, from my internal customers, I would hear the heroic tales of efforts to provide service above and beyond contract requirements, usually through unusual or difficult operating circumstances. Then I would receive the customer's feedback. Sharing good news is a joy. Sharing not so good news was no fun at all, and I became the proverbial messenger. It was definitely a job that provided excellent training for the priesthood. Contrary to popular belief, the customer actually isn't always right, but perception *is* everything.

Let's just say it. The Gospel message today is a real shocker. Jesus is offering a distinct and unique alternative to the teaching of the Judean leaders. This most famous of teachings focuses on the kingdom of God. It isn't like anything the crowd or Jesus' disciples have ever heard before. It isn't what you or I would probably expect either. From the inception of this great country, we have all grown up with the expectation and the promise of two key cultural factors: freedom and the pursuit of happiness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shares nine blessings of kingdom living. That is nine characteristics or signs of happiness. Happy are the poor in spirit... Happy are those who mourn... happy are the meek... happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... happy are the merciful... happy are the pure in heart... happy are the peacemakers. And now the really tough ones: happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... happy are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Are you feeling blessed today? Are you happy about what you just heard? Does this teaching of Jesus challenge your expectations or your perception of Christianity? It is one of many Scriptural passages that may well be mood altering in effect, because it demands that we shift our perception to align more and more with God's will than our own.

As you know, today is All Saints' Sunday. It is a time to celebrate the lives of all God's children throughout the ages, like those described in our reading from Revelation who are living in glory with the Lord. Plus, the lives of all the saints who are still working out our salvation here on earth, and all those who are yet to be born into new life in Christ. In Holy Baptism, we are adopted as God's children, becoming members of the Body of Christ. Baptism, in which we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, is just the beginning of our new lives. And what a matchless gift. It is the power of the Holy Spirit who works in my heart and yours to transform us, and through each of us, to transform the world into the fullness of God's kingdom. Perhaps having just heard these strange blessings of kingdom living, you are wondering why anyone would want to be a member of the Body of Christ. Our Baptismal Covenant is a very serious

commitment to a way of life that in truth is filled with many rewards. Yet it is also a way of life that is so counter-cultural that it can and does get us into trouble with many in the world who are seeking alternate means of happiness. God does not ask for much, just that we lose our lives in order to gain true life and freedom in Christ.

A covenant is about promises. God's promises to you and me, and our promises in return. Now being who we are, when someone promises us new life that sparks all kinds of images and expectations about how that new life might look. In terms of our relationship with God, if we think of God as some kind of omnipotent vending machine there to meet our every whim, we are going to be sorely disappointed. As for our relationship with others and the world around us, whatever we may think, there is one thing for sure. We *are* inevitably and relentlessly shaped by the expectations and experiences of our families – especially those of our parents, grandparents, and siblings -- and not in any small measure by the distorted view of the good life that we get bombarded with through TV and advertising. So is it any wonder that so many people you and I meet are fundamentally unhappy with their lives. Perception is everything. Looking for happiness anywhere but from the source of all blessings will constantly disappoint and frustrate us. If, as faithful followers of Christ, we do only one thing in our lives, let it be this. Share with everyone we know or meet, and especially with our children and grandchildren the good news about our own source of happiness in life as it is revealed for us in today's Gospel lesson. The material things that we surround ourselves with will never bring us more than a fleeting happiness. Even the people we share our lives with, be it family, friends, spouse or partner will disappoint us in some way, at some time, in our lives.

Jesus has shared the truth of happiness with us today in God's blessings, however strange it sounds to our ears. Jesus has shared with us today what the kingdom of God looks like, and the characteristics of those who live there. It is as familiar as your own home, and it is all around us. You and I know that God desires our presence in the kingdom because we are followers of Jesus. We cannot buy a ticket to the kingdom of God we are all invited. We don't pay an entrance fee, but we give our gifts in gratitude. It is simply a way of life that we see, hear, touch, taste and smell when you and I share our life in Christ. It is my honor to know and love many saints that are already dwellers in God's kingdom. There is my dear friend Claire, whose humility draws many to Christ, because she always seeks to love and serve the Lord above all amongst God's children of all ages, and that is irresistible. Sheena has mourned many losses in her life, but now freely shares God's comfort with amazing patience and compassion as a teacher and caregiver. There is Joan, in whom God's meekness gives her the grace to be concerned primarily for the looks of others, regardless of her own reflection. Joan repeatedly lets her hair grow out and then has it cut off to make wigs for cancer patients. Then there are those who work for justice and righteousness, including Kenny and Toni who give of their time and resources to cook and serve meals to the hungry and homeless, and my missionary friends Alice and Josyanne. David who visits convicted sex offenders in prison, and Woody who started a recycling program because he understands what it means to be a steward of God's creation, and wants others to share in that responsibility. Finally, there is Nancy who has been a faithful hospice volunteer for years, offering her gift of mercy to those who are dying in faith, those who have lost their faith, and those who have never really known God's love in their lives. My list of saints goes on – these are all real people, living a kingdom life.

I know one other thing for sure. If you asked any of my kingdom-living friends if they are happy, you would get pretty much the same response. "Oh yes, I am very blessed." They have each found true freedom in Christ. And if God asks you if you are happy, what will your answer be?

Perceiving God's love is everything.

Amen.