

All Saints Day

November 3, 2019

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

**Deuteronomy 6: 5-7**

**John 17: 20-25**

**Leaving and Living Legacies**



By Louise Bennett

Jesus was all about legacy; and complicated and convoluted as this reading from John might seem to be—confusing actually—the bottom line is that Jesus is talking about just that: legacy. Here is the text translated in a more contemporary wording. Reading from The Message Jesus offered these words at the last minute in a time of tribulation where his death is imminent:

*I'm praying not only for them but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind - just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us. Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me. The same glory you gave me, I gave them, so they'll be as unified and together as we are - I in them and you in me. Then they'll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you've sent me and loved them in the same way you've loved me. Father, I want those you gave me to be with me, right where I am, so they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me, having loved me long before there ever was a world. Righteous Father, the world has never known you, but I have known you, and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission.*

This is the word of the Lord.

*Completing down to the last detail what you assigned me to do.* Jesus says of his own ministry and calling...doing thoroughly what it was that God asked of him. This legacy of faithfulness and perfection belongs to Jesus and finds its foundation in having knowledge of God—knowing God—the one and only true God...knowing God perfectly in a way that gets passed on to us. Truth is, however, none of us gets this perfectly. None of us is perfect. Even these saints gone before us who now *are* perfect were not so while here on this earth.

So, I have a joke...

God looked at earth and wanted to know what kind of *behavior* was going on. He decided to send an angel down to Earth to check it out. So he called one of His angels and sent the angel to Earth for a time. When the angel returned, he told God, "Yes, it is bad on Earth; 95% are misbehaving and 5% are not."

God thought for a moment and said, "Maybe I had better send down a second angel to get another opinion." So God called another angel and sent him to Earth for a time.

When the angel returned he went to God and said, "Yes, it's true, the Earth is in decline; 95% are misbehaving and 5% are being good."

God was not pleased. So He decided to E-mail the 5% that were good, because He wanted to encourage them. Give them a little something to help them keep going. Do you know what that E-mail said?

No?

I didn't get one either. (lol)

Today we honor and remember loved ones...saints now gone before us...with a procession of banners created by the deacons of Woods. Each banner displaying symbols of a person's life...often representing important and fond memories of that individual...a love of gardening or photography or fishing perhaps. We remember their enjoyment of sailing, their amazing abilities at teaching, or serving, or building. We picture the person cooking and hosting parties, or donating time and energy as a volunteer. Memories may recall a love for music, pets, grandchildren and works of art.

All of these are important to us...but they are not the same as legacy. Memories give us specific recall of a person through the things which they enjoyed or with which they were particularly gifted...everything from the clothes they loved, to written or painted dowries of art, like the painting by Louise Bennett on the bulletin cover; quips or favorite sayings, to award-winning accomplishments. Legacies are different in that they not only are appreciated by us but may change us...have meaning that alters our own lives and the ways we live them. A legacy references who the person was, not just what he or she did. Legacy is about being, not doing.

The psychologist and psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, said, "I am what survives me." This must cause us to re-evaluate our own legacies. What is it that will survive you?

Each saint we honor today has a legacy. Each saint has influenced and/or helped form who we are in some way. It is a privilege to receive a legacy which may shape us and inspire us in positive directions. Let's take the memory thing a bit further...when memories are values that people held. That which we value is an inheritance from those who have gone before us. But not all valuing is the same. From the saints whose lives we recall today, we are able to name many values held by them: honesty and pursuit of justice, and advocacy for the oppressed. Our text from Deuteronomy helps us to frame those values and, while they are critical in many respects, the text tells us that the most important value we may inherit is a legacy of knowing and loving God. To raise a child and influence others by the knowledge of God is to leave the greatest legacy of all...a spiritual heritage and legacy.

"I am what survives me." For us, as people of faith, what survives us must be more than a will filled with treasures to be inherited or even more abstractly, character traits that are enviable. It must move beyond success to significance.

In my own family we are still in the midst of sorting through values and a house full of "things" since my mother's death six months ago. For us the process is incredibly organized thanks to my two corporate minded little sisters who have organized the process into 7 tiers. We are only just past Tier 2 by the way. I am, of course, the designated weeper/the keeper of sentiment. Recently

I took two days at home in Jacksonville with them and we tackled items in what was their shared childhood bedroom. We sorted some clothes, old toys, old report cards (they of course had straight A's) and then uncovered a small, stuffed white mouse. We paused. His name had been Snowy. After a brief conversation they determined that Snowy had had a good life but his current state of bare patches and not so clean fur, probably rendered him even a Good Will reject. "Oh fine," I said. "I'll take him home." They rolled their eyes but relief on their faces was evident. Soon the older of my little sisters trotted a ruined bear over my way accompanied by a child voice, "What about me?" she whimpered. "You can't leave me." And so it went until 9 of these characters found their way into my designated box.

Memories are like that...sentimental or practical. Memories are often what we recall about someone as we are able to speak about who the person was, describe them, and say something about what they did and enjoyed in life...all important...successful responses but not necessarily significant ones...until the question about legacy is posed. What is the life lesson/the legacy that imprinted on you? Helped form you?

As people of faith, the legacy that we leave must be primarily about the knowledge and love of Christ. I began this meditation by saying that Jesus is all about legacy, and declaring that scripture over and over again emphasizes the importance of teaching children about the love of God and marking them with one's own faith-filled love of Christ. It's about passing on the faith, not just cognitively, but in a life changing way.

Jesus seeks to ascertain that when he asks his disciples, *Who do people say that I am?* Not what do they say I do, or what are my personality characteristics even. *Who do people say that I am?* The disciples answer with various responses concerning his reputation.

And then Jesus gets personal. *Who do YOU say that I am?* Implicit in the question is an inquiry about what he means to them...an inquiry about significance...legacy.

Evangelist Michael Green asked all the clergy in attendance at a conference, "When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?" The challenge had such an impact on him that Martin Copenhaver, former pastor of the Wellesly United Church of Christ in Massachusetts, told his people exactly what Christ meant to him in his final sermon before moving on to become president of Andover Newton Theological School. Here is the result in his words:

"At the conclusion of that sermon I stood at the door and shook hands with the congregation. One woman, a beloved saint of the church, came to the head of the line but was so overcome with emotion that she could not speak and went to the back of the line. I assumed that she simply did not know how to say goodbye. But when she finally reached me again, her voice cracked slightly as she asked, 'Why didn't you tell us this before?'"

This is an important question we all must ask ourselves...not just the pastors. We are all ministers of Jesus Christ with the responsibility to pass on a legacy of faith.

We have a tradition at this church at the end of a person's life of anointing them with the sign of the Cross and the words, "Claimed as Christ's own forever." We use these same words at baptisms and confirmation, and wholeness services as well. It is a time of visible legacy passing as we confirm their place in the Kingdom of God...the *I in you and you in me* moment of which Jesus speaks recorded in the Gospel of John wherein we are all unified and together. And from which we give thanks that nothing...not death or anything else can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

So who do you say that Jesus is...and have you told anyone?