

All Saints Sunday 2017
 November 5, 2017
 The Rev. Fred Devall

A major theme of the Gospel of Matthew is conflict between the Kingdoms of Heaven and Earth. Earthly kingdoms are characterized by conquest, empire, wealth, and power to compel. Heavenly powers are characterized by this list from the Beatitudes:

Poverty
 Mourning
 Meekness
 Hunger
 Mercy
 Purity of heart
 Peacemaking
 Persecution
 Revulsion and persecution

“The first four Beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-6) focus on those who suffer now, but who will receive justice in the coming reign of God. The remaining verses (vv. 7-11) promise blessings for those who strive to alleviate the conditions describe in the first four Beatitudes” (*Synthesis* Nov. 5, 2017, p. 1).

On more than one occasion Jesus promises to flip the script. “The first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30). By in large the Saints of the church are those people who were last by circumstance of birth but became great in heavenly terms because of their witness to the resurrection. Or they are Saints because they chose to be last in order to alleviate the suffering of others.

What does this look like to choose the Kingdom of Heaven over the Kingdom of Earth? Here is a contemporary example. The Rev. Ronald Apollo is an ordained cleric in the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith. In addition to serving as an Air Force Chaplain he is also head chaplain of FCI Bennettsville, a medium-security federal correctional institute in South Carolina. This church calls on its members to renounce “the weapons of human strife”.

For Apollo, this presents a dilemma because this year the Federal Bureau of Prisons told him he must carry pepper spray on the job because of a year-old policy crafted to protect correctional workers. To Chaplain Apollo, carrying what he deems to be a weapon compromises his impartial status as a counselor and aligns him with correctional officers, not clergy. He may well lose his job, but he is willing to accept the consequences if his appeals are rejected. (The Marshall Project: “A Chaplain’s Conscience vs. the Bureau of Prisons, September 25, 2017).

Chaplain Apollo is willing to pay the price in this world because he is unwilling to forfeit his faith to serve a temporary power. For that is what earthly power is- temporary. In his work he may

be inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, he may have been sustained at some time by the witness of St. Anna, but he is not trying to be Francis or Anna. He is trying to live completely into being Ronald Apollo, child of God.

Eugene Peterson's puts it this way in *The Message*,

"Jesus said, 'You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

The Saints are able to take themselves out of the picture because they know they are not here to make themselves famous but instead to make Jesus famous. Their witness helps spread Jesus' Word. Their witness is an exercise of heavenly power in an earthly realm. Earthly powers rarely if ever roll over.

Hear again from Peterson on the last Beatitude. "You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that- count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer even!- for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And you know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

The Saints of God don't sit around and tell God they will get cracking on ministry just as soon as God provides more talents, more money, more time, or more faith. The Saints are able to recognize that they already possess everything that is needed to be a child of God, a servant of the Lord.

As you know next week is Consecration Sunday. Fr. A.J. Heine will be our guest preacher at all three services and will also lead us through the process of filling out our pledge cards. As you make spiritual preparations for your commitment, I pray you will operate out of the plenty you already possess and not the big lie of scarcity. That's another form of conflict between heaven and earth. In heaven there is always enough, and on earth there is never enough. Bet on heaven. It's sure to outlast earth and the people we celebrate today- the Saints of the church understood this at their core. *Amen.*