

“Longing for Those Who Long for Us”

A Sermon based on Ephesians 1:11-23
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, November 3rd, 2019
by Rev. David Oliver-Holder

Why do we still refer to ourselves as Protestants? I have been ruminating on this question lately. It’s a question I’ve considered before, when I was a student in Chicago. By far, the majority of students with whom I studied were Roman Catholic. A handful of us belonged to other traditions.

When we discussed a certain topic in class, generally the Roman Catholic perspective was assumed. And that was no problem, because there was far more that we had in common than we didn’t have in common. Several times during those years, the professor or one of the students would turn to one of us who was not Roman Catholic and ask, “So, how are things different in the Protestant Tradition?”

There was no condescension intended. In fact, I remain so thankful for the collegial spirit at Catholic Theological Union and how genuinely respectful everyone was. The hospitality I experienced is nothing short of Christ-like.

But when I heard this question asking for the Protestant perspective, I’m contrarian enough to think, “Am I really Protestant?” I thought the origins of American Baptists, which I was at that time. Baptist founders were trained and served in the Anglican tradition, which was in 1609 not a very long tradition. It was still young enough to remain very Catholic.

But even in the Church of England, abuses that they had known in the Roman Church were being addressed. And let us remember how the Church of England came to be. It wasn’t because the churches of England were protesting. It was because Henry VIII was protesting. The Pope at that time refused to annul one of his marriages, and so Henry withdrew the churches of the commonwealth from the authority and control of Rome.

When Baptists came on the scene, they did so by “separating” from the Church of England. They were one of the many groups known as Separatists. With that designation I was comfortable, more so than with Protestant.

But in class, or when I was doing something else that is ecumenical, I would go with Protestant because we all know what we mean, and it is not so important among friends that I was prepared to nitpick over the word.

With that said, I still wonder why we call ourselves Protestant. What are we protesting today? We may be protesting actions within our own denomination, but are we protesting anything the Roman Catholic Church is doing? Do you see why I ask the question?

The questions that were asked and debated in the Reformation have been settled one way or another. The different traditions that we know today formed in the Reformation have moved on. The Roman Catholic Church underwent a Counter Reformation in response to the protests of the Protestants, and in some cases in reaction to the protests. But they have moved on as well.

Why do we continue to identify ourselves based on the Reformation, a period in history that is important, yes, but a period of time that has been over for more than 500 years? The questions and debates of that time are not the questions and debates of our time. And where those 500-year-old debates are still being debated, we must ask ourselves why are we still debating them when nearly everyone else in all traditions has moved on?

I ask this question because I believe that God is at work among us to birth something new. I see all of the pain that we are experiencing in all the churches as evidence that something new is being born.

Some are trying to resist by becoming more rigid and conformist. Others who are struggling to discern the mind of Christ and understand where Christ is leading us today see boundaries that continue to plague us as hindrances, as human-created walls and fences among us and that need to be crossed or taken down. These are just two ways that some are reacting to the pain of the new thing which is being born among us.

What I am determined to do is be patient and to pay attention. As painful as these times may be for us in the Church, I believe that these are exciting times to be in the Church. Just as I anticipated the births of our three children, I

anticipate the birthing of the new reality in the life of the Church. This is a good time to be alive.

II

One thing that those of us who are called Protestant are doing these days is rediscovering and reclaiming our heritage. Because of the intensity of feeling and animosity generated during the Reformation, many of those forced out of the Roman Church or who left freely, rejected so much of church history simply because it was perceived to be Roman Catholic. Some went so far as to strip their sanctuaries of all adornment, taking out all of the musical instruments, art work and tapestries and whitewashing the walls. As is the case with reform movements, there are always excesses.

What so many of us are doing today is acknowledging those excesses and saying as well that there was much that was good about the Roman Church that we would do well to recover. It is not that we want to become Roman Catholic. It is simply a movement to recover what has been ours all along.

And so, more and more of us are observing Advent and Lent, as well as recovering the entire liturgical calendar. More and more churches are restoring beautiful adornments to their sanctuaries and worship services, because worship ought rightly to be a wondrous experience.

As you may have guessed by now, looking at the bulletin, another part of the tradition being recovered is All Saints Day. For too long, we have been content to remember our beloved dead on a secular occasion: Memorial Day. For us, for members of the Body of Jesus Christ, the proper and traditional occasion to remember is All Saints.

From nearly the beginning, Christians have commemorated deceased leaders and beloved disciples.ⁱ This was especially true of the martyrs. Those saints we know from the New Testament and some other well-known leaders were remembered universally. In addition to those saints, local congregations kept their own lists of those they remembered locally.

Now, the reformers rejected the observance of saints' days because superstition and silliness became attached to many of the days, and because

some saints had days of remembrance who had no basis in history. They were useful fictions.

But there are good theological reasons for remembering the saints. The saints manifest the continuing work of Jesus Christ in human life. In remembering our saints we also celebrate and proclaim the communion of the saints, a community which transcends time.

When we gather at this table, we are not the only ones present. All of those who have lived the faith and who have completed their races are present here as well. At the Table we embody, as well as get a glimpse of, Paradise.

Is such a notion hokey superstition? I suppose there is that temptation. But to say such is only to take seriously what scripture says about unseen realities, about those who die going to be with the Lord. To be aware of such a reality is to see as Ephesians describes seeing, “with the eyes of your heart enlightened,” It is to acknowledge that we love the saints just like the Ephesians, whether those saints share the present with us or whether they have preceded us and maybe even whether they will follow us. We love the saints.

And why not confess formally in worship what we say informally, that the saints love us, too. As one writer lamented long ago, “The saints want us to be with them, and we are indifferent... Let us long for those who are longing for us.”ⁱⁱ

Remembering the saints in this way admits our humanity. All of us have a basic need for heroes, for role models. If we would allow it, the saints can be heroes of the faith for us. We can learn from their examples and from their struggles and we can find strength in the strength they demonstrated in facing many of the same trials and temptations we face. They can teach us how to overcome and remain faithful.

The reformers admitted as much in their actions. Even though they threw out the old sanctoral cycle, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli were soon unofficially canonized.ⁱⁱⁱ They, along with others, came to have their lives commemorated.

The secular world has its own sanctoral cycle, in which great political and civic leaders are remembered. Even sports stars and entertainers and certain royalty are remembered on special days. So it is little wonder that we Protestants

are recovering All Saints Day, and even beginning to observe special days for specific saints at various times of the year. There is a holy wisdom in remembering and honoring our connections with all of the saints, past, present, and even future.

III

In our empirical, and in many ways barren, time, it is hard, maybe even scandalous, to believe in unseen realities. Our time is skeptical of any faith that is “the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” But it need not be that way for us in the household of faith.

This is far from being otherworldly. As one writer has expressed it, “Throughout history it has been precisely those who believed most strongly in the next world who did the most to improve this one. That’s what you would expect. If you believe the road you’re on goes nowhere, you don’t take it too seriously. If you believe it goes somewhere important, you keep it up.”^{iv}

All Saints is not about being otherworldly. It is being honest that there is more to this world than meets the eye.

I conclude with an inscription that is found at a Carmelite monastery in Waterford, Ireland. Rather than looking at things from our point of view, it presents the point of view of the saints.

*I have only slipped away into the next room.
 Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.
 Call me by my old familiar name,
 speak to me in the easy way which you always used.
 Laugh as we always laughed together.
 Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.
 Let my name be the household word it always was.
 Let it be spoken without effort.
 Life means all that it ever meant.
 It was the same as it ever was;
 there is absolutely unbroken continuity.
 Why should I be out of your mind because I am out of your sight?
 I am but waiting for you, for an interval,
 somewhere very near just around the corner.
 All is well.
 Nothing is past, nothing is lost.
 One brief moment and all will be as it was before --*

*only better, infinitely happier and forever,
we will all be one together with God.^v*

And all the saints of God said, "Amen."

ⁱ Hoyt L. Hickman, et. al., *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) p. 268.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), p. 47, quoting St. Bernard.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hickman, p. 268.

^{iv} Richard S. Hipps, ed., *When A Child Dies* (Macon, Georgia: Peak Road, 1996), p. 36, quoting Peter Kreeft.

^v Hipps, p. 37.