

Mike Bennett  
First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
All Saints Sunday  
November 2, 2008

1 John 3.1-3  
**Matthew 5.1-12**

## Blessed by the Dead

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”  
—Matthew 5.4

The dead are with us—that much is clear. The only question, really, is just *how* are they with us? Do they torment us or watch over us? Do they haunt us or bless us? That they are, in some sense, *with* us...that’s a given. I think of the title of one of Alan Shapiro’s collections of poems, mostly about his family: *The Dead Alive and Busy*.

All Saints Day, November 1, is the holy day set aside by the Christian calendar with the specific purpose of providing us some space and time to deal with the mysterious interchange between the living and the dead. Within this space and time, we can do many different kinds of emotional and theological work. It may be a time, simply, to begin to face the role that loss has played in your life and your journey of faith. If you’re of a certain age—surprisingly high—you may have been able to avoid doing much of this at all.

Or, All Saints may be a day to think about those who have been examples of faith for us: the Christian martyrs and “official” saints, perhaps; or the Sunday school teachers or Pastors or youth leaders who left an imprint; or an activist who refused to let scorn or consequence deter her from her cause; or maybe a person who just seemed to live out of a quiet peace and calm that we envied in him.

And All Saints can also be a time for us to deal with the most personal and intense of our own griefs: close friends, siblings, parents, spouses, partners, children. Knowing this congregation for only six years, I know that we have many of these. In fact, they are here with us this morning. I can almost see them from my perch here in the pulpit.

There's a wonderful meditation at the end of Norman McLean's wonderful book, *A River Runs Through It*. A fly fisherman in his old age, the waters and the loves of his life begin to merge:

Now nearly all those I loved...when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them....

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

Our relationship with the dead always *begins* with haunting, I suppose. Where else *could* it start? Death is the ultimate mystery, the ultimate otherness, the ultimate separation. For most of us that translates pretty quickly into fear—death is *scary* (and thus the Halloween side of All Saints). Even if we've overcome our fear or, as we're learning to distinguish in our Sunday morning book study, even if we've *ordered* our fear in the proper way—put it in its proper place and perspective—even then, death is a mystery, a puzzle, a question.

So we develop *practices* to help us deal with the mystery. Some of these are formal practices, developed by an entire culture over time: the pulling over to the side of the road for a funeral procession, the pastor leading the casket out of the church, the placing of flowers at the grave. Others are individual, personal, and perhaps unique: thinking of a lost spouse at a certain time or place, leaving a place in a home as a reminder of his presence, remembering a special joke or story.

Practices will differ between people. In my family, my mother and older sister both live in Seattle. For my Mom, visiting my Dad's grave helps her find comfort. She goes often. For my sister it doesn't work that way. She prefers to remember my dad in different ways—maybe by baking his favorite blueberry pie. Though I live far away, I tend to favor my Mom's way.

And I'm sure my brother in California has his own ways—most of them involving the golf course. (I have a few of those, too!)

What matters is not so much whether you visit the cemetery or you don't. What matters is that you develop practices of remembering and of incorporating the dead into your life. When we do this, God helps us transform that inevitable initial haunting into an eventual blessing. The dead help us gain meaning in the present. They help us understand our place in the long flow of history. Their absence reminds us of our death and of the fact that the world will continue without us.

Take a little time this morning to think of the dead who are “alive and busy” in your life today. Think about the practices you have developed, or might develop, to help them move from haunting to blessing. In some cases this will be extremely difficult—as when there has been abuse and hurt. Reconciliation is hard any time, but especially so when the other party inhabits a different world. But even in less extreme cases, all of us need to find graceful ways to deal with the dead. We will need to forgive. We will need to accept forgiveness. We will need to find a way to say things like, “You know, you were right about that. Now I understand.”

One of my practices involves the portraits of my fifteen predecessors on the wall in the hallway. Though our lives and cultures might be very different, I feel like I share something special in common with them. Churches change very slowly and maintain some characteristics for amazingly long periods of time, so I feel like these people know my life in a way that most others don't. So, I talk to them. Sometimes it is just a casual, “Good night, boys!” Other times I ask them if they ever had any of the same doubts and fears about the church that I have. Since most of them began their work here in their early middle age, I ask them what it was like for them—to lose their fathers, to approach 50, to see their kids grow up. Some nights, going home tired, I share with them a piece of my Dad's best practical advice: Never quit at night. I'd swear I've seen a couple heads nodding in agreement on that one!

I hope you have practices of your own. If you don't, I hope you'll open yourselves to the dead in some new way. It is scary, but it can be immensely healing and helpful. Just as individuals have practices, so does the Church. With All Saints, we have a way to invite the dead back into our midst, to share their wisdom, to remind us of their example, and to extend our fellowship through time and history. When we gather at the table, we join a feast that was going on before we arrived and that will continue after we are gone.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” The call to remember the dead is right there in the Beatitudes. Jesus understands that death is hard on the living—he ranks grief right up there with poverty and hunger. It is a hard thing, but a necessary thing. It is *there* whether we acknowledge it or not. The dead are with us—that much is clear. The only question, really, is just *how* are they with us?