Revelation 7:9-17

I John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

The story is told about a man, Clement Hofbauer, who was apprenticed to a baker as a lad of 18th century Eastern Europe. That was a good position for a poor boy, but he aspired for something else. He aspired to be a priest. At legal age he took leave of the bakery.

One day in Warsaw, Clement Hofbauer saw a homeless boy on the street. He brought him to the rectory of a nearby church, cleaned him up, fed him, and then taught him a trade. When the number of boys grew too large that he kept rescuing, Hofbauer opened the “Child Jesus Refuge” for homeless boys.

Going into a bakery to buy bread for his wards, he came upon a master baker without an assistant. Hofbauer spent the day kneading dough and baking it, using all his old skills. He got bread for his boys that day and for many days to come.

But to keep them fed and clothed, he often had to beg. He did so without shame. On one occasion he went begging at a local pub. When he asked for a donation, one of the patrons spat beer into Hofbauer's face. Wiping off the beer, he responded, "That was for me. Now what do you have for my boys?" The men in the bar were so astounded by the response that they gave Hofbauer more than 100 silver coins.

By this point in his life he had, in fact, become a priest. And just less than one hundred years after his death, he became a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. He is Saint Clement Hofbauer.

This is the first Sunday after All Saints’ Day, which is observed on November First. That was last Wednesday. November First puts the “hallow” in Halloween – or “all hallow’s eve,” which is the night before we remember those who are hallowed or holy or sacred. We think of people like Clement Hofbauer as being worthy of sainthood. But 20th century theologian Paul Tillich shines a different light on saintliness. He writes, “The saint is saint, not because he or she is ‘good’ but because he or she has become transparent for something that is more than self alone.”

Have you ever met someone you couldn’t “read”? You couldn’t fathom? Sometimes I describe those people as being opaque. Something about their personality or manner is inscrutable. That’s the opposite of transparent. People who are transparent seem to have nothing to hide. They seem to be open and available. Transparent for God’s love to flow to them and through them.

In spiritual terms, then, All Saints’ Day is like a yoga class. It requires us to stretch. We are called to think big; to believe that every human has the potential to respond to God’s love; every human, not just those predisposed to saintliness So the question stretching us this All Saints’ Day is: to what ends are we willing to be “transparent” for God’s love? To what ends? To what purpose?

The Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, retired bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska, says: “What you do is critical. You may not think so because you see yourself as being without much authority or influence, but the things you do count for more than you may imagine. Every person you reach will touch a thousand more. The direction you share with a single person can turn the wheel of history over time. You are an important part of a great story. What you say and do matters, so speak up, take a risk, and dare to be remembered.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Becoming transparent for God’s love isn’t something one does from the couch. What you say and do matters so we must be about saying and doing. How does the Gospel direct us in that regard? Tend the sick, naked and hungry; comfort the afflicted. Turn the other cheek. Return good when evil has been done to you or said of you. Love God and your neighbor with as much abandon as you love yourself. “Those are stirring slogans,” says Phyllis McGinley, author of *Saint Watching.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

She says, “Most of us absent-mindedly attend to these words and admire them as we admire all lofty phrases. We even try to follow them *in moderation*. We agree that charity covers a multitude of sins and besides it’s tax deductible!” But she stresses that saints are not moderate. “Sell all you have and give to the poor” to them is not something done in moderation.

Through the centuries of Christian history, the primary Scripture message for All Saints’ Day has been the Beatitudes. A beatitude is a blessing. So in a dramatic reversal of how the world sees reality, Jesus describes the reality of God:

* Unsure of your direction in life? You’re blessed anyway.
* Lost under the weight of grief and loss? Joy comes in the morning.
* Undervalued and unheard by those around you? God hears you.
* Groaning with hunger pangs; longing for a moment of respite? The comforter has come.
* Aching for peace and righteousness, only to be smitten with war and revilement? God is travailing right alongside you.
* Damaged by those spreading lies to discredit you? So was Jesus.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The saints, Jesus reminds us, aren’t those who have it all figured out, whose prayer life is perfect, whose service to church and community are exemplary. Because, frankly, those people don’t exist! No one has it all figured out. No one has a perfect prayer life. No one’s service is beyond the reach of complication, confusion, and even contempt!

On the contrary: Jesus tells us and the Book of Revelation reminds us that the saints are those who have suffered greatly – and those who suffer still, even in our midst *– and yet praise God all the more.* Jesus teaches that those who have found God’s blessing within their earthly poverty, sorrow, and suffering are saints. It is the presence of God that makes blessedness possible wherever one is.

This reminds me of the nearly ninety-year-old woman, nearly blind, who could no longer live in her beloved house. She was led by a nursing aide into her new home, an apartment smaller than a hotel room in an assisted living facility. Upon entering she exclaimed, “Why, it’s beautiful! Just beautiful!” The young aide was perplexed. “I thought you couldn’t see,” she said. The woman replied, “Oh it doesn’t matter. That’s how I see it in my mind.”

Don’t dismiss sainthood as out of reach. It is meant for all of us, not just for those who have been canonized, like Clement Hofbauer [hoff-bower] or Angela of Foligno, a woman considered to be a “great medieval mystic.” From a wealthy family, Angela knew both the value of money and its worthlessness. She wrote in the *Book of Divine Consolation*:

“If we were able to purchase the Kingdom of God with wealth – gold, silver, and precious stones – or with other riches – like luxury, knowledge, or power – the Kingdom of God would be out of reach for many, inasmuch as we do not all possess these things. But God has granted that the kingdom may be gained with things all of us possess at all times and of which we may even have an abundance. For there is no person who cannot be poor for love of Christ; there is no person who cannot work and do penance at least in his heart; there is none who cannot endure contempt. Certainly no one passes through this life without encountering some of these things, which, when borne patiently and cheerfully for Christ’s sake, will make us worthy of the Kingdom of God.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Amen.

1. SYNTHESIS, a sermons help publication, (PNMSI Publishing Co., Boyds MD), Volume 30 No. 11, for November 5, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Saint Watching,* Viking Press, New York, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "The Saints Beside You," the Rev. Marshall A. Jolly, *Sermons that Work*, Episcopal Digital Network, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Angela of Foligno (1248–1309) in *The Book of Divine Consolation,* quoted in SYNTHESIS, Volume 30 No. 11, for November 5, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)