

They Are Not Gone – All Saints B

“It is God’s will that I should lose nothing of all that has been given me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.” Gonna raise us up on the last day. That’s what the man said and the kind of hope we feel when we hear these words is wondrous indeed. The ones we love will no longer be separated from us; the frustrations and regrets of this life will evaporate; there will be peace in the valley.

We acknowledge and rejoice in the promise God has made to us, the promise we accept in our baptism, that all shall be raised up. Hereabouts you can easily find yourself this weekend in the midst of *El Dia de Los Muertos*, The Day of the Dead. Scholars trace the origins of the modern Mexican holiday to indigenous observances dating back to the Aztec festival dedicated to the goddess *Mictecacihuatl*. The holiday has spread throughout the world, being absorbed within other deep traditions for honoring the dead. Today we too celebrate the Feast of All Saints. We can take remembrance a step further as those who have shuffled off this mortal coil come back for a visit to reassure us of the continuity and permanence of our spiritual existence. As our Collect proclaims, “We are knit together in one fellowship: the mystical body of Christ.”

One implication of this permanence is that life is recognized as a divine commodity: a form of currency God uses to do good in the World. Furthermore, that power of goodness itself persists beyond this earthly life. Just think of the good that we ourselves have experienced in our lifetimes, the good that continues to affect us long after its purveyors have died. They are not gone from our hearts, though they have long gone from

our hands. From now on, as the Kiswahili has it, *Kuonana kwaolewa*: 'All our meetings with them are God's doing.' I've been corresponding with our sisters and brothers in Tanzania, so please forgive a couple proverbs. The good continues outside the parameters of biology and rationality.

When you visit the Steinbeck Museum in Salinas, with its exhibit of his books and their origins, look for a wooden box in the *East of Eden* section, about the size of a top dresser drawer. The author carved it for a friend. Engraved on the lid is the Hebrew word, *Timshel*, meaning 'Thou mayest,' which Steinbeck describes as the central theme of his novel. God says *Timshel* to Cain while kicking him out into the wilderness for killing his brother Abel: "Thou mayest now rule over sin." Which means Cain has the capacity to choose his character from now on, so too have we all since that momentous day, since we are all Cain's children.

In the 4th Century, the great Church father Gregory of Nyssa described the results of such a choice: "Christ has accomplished an actual fellowship with humankind...in baptism a resemblance develops between those who follow and Him who leads the way... Nature does not allow us an exact imitation, but our sins are indeed suppressed by the sign of death given in water of baptism. Sin is not completely wiped away, but there is a kind of break in the continuity of evil."

Now who doesn't want to be part of a break in the continuity of evil? 'Sin is not completely wiped away?' Yes, that would be a substantial understatement. And everybody here is in on the action to some extent: sin-free living has yet to be accomplished by anybody. God's investment in this commodity called human life is a risky one – 'Bullish' I think is the term – God really wants a big profit from the venture, but She won't manipulate the market or trade inside. God will not interfere.

Instead, we are the ones who must continually choose more thoughtful and accountable lives. We must because we may.

In his forward to *The Pogo Papers*, the great Walt Kelly gives a famous description of the issue:

“Traces of nobility, gentleness and courage persist in all people, do what we will to stamp out the trend. So, too, do characteristics that are ugly. But there is no need to salley forth; those things which make us human are always close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground, with our small flags waving, with tinny blasts on our tiny trumpets, we shall meet the enemy, and not only may he be ours, he may be us!”

If God is counting on us to work good in the world, to be lifted up is to become part of a different society than our most instinctive choices would dictate. To be lifted up is to embrace another culture from the one we so often see reported in the news, depicted in entertainment and advertised for sale. Our desire is the visa to this new land. Our longing for connection with the living Christ gets us in. Our response to God’s invitation: “*Timshel*; Thou mayest,” determines our spiritual nationality.

Maybe we remember the slogan: “Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life.” It was a catchy, exciting and motivating phrase. But if there’s one thing this season of Halloween, All Saints Day, and *El Dia de Los Muertos* makes us aware of, it’s that we are part of something far bigger than our stay here in the campground. As they say in Tanzania, “*Ajali Muhuli*:” ‘Our fate is but an interval.’ Once we choose baptized life, we are connected beyond space and time. If our baptism came when we were babies, a choice made by parents and elders for us, then we must choose again

ourselves. But once we do, it is a permanent choice, and at the risk of nitpicking, the day we do that is the one and only first day of the rest of our lives.

This earthly sojourn surely contains crossroads, pivot points whereupon our response to God's invitation sets us in motion either toward or away from goodness. Things develop. Stuff happens. But if we think in eternal terms, we cannot know or even conceive of the extent of time before us; there is no remainder to our lives, only eternity. All the time that's gone before, can be measured in two segments: more or less: the X-teen million years between the dawn of earthly life and our own birth, and the one, or ten, or sixty years it was before we first heard and chose to believe Jesus' words: "No one can come to me unless drawn by God; and I will raise that person up!" The very first day of the rest of our lives was the day God led us to Jesus, and we been in the thick or thin of it ever since. The rest of our lives stretches out behind us only to the point of our birth, but the time ahead is utterly and unalterably incalculable; it is forever and ever. There are no markers, no measures of time or space beyond this moment. We are baptized people, and so we are forever alive in the risen body of Christ. Which means today isn't the first day of the rest of my life, if anything, it's the last day of the rest of my life. This is the last day; we are being raised up now, as much as we choose to be, each and every one; each and every day, which is why we say, "*Bwana Asifiwe!*" 'Praise the Lord.'