

The Last Day of the Rest of Your Life

All Saints Day, Year C

Proper 26C

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.

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, traditionally November 1. 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. Visiting the Steinbeck Museum last year before the diocesan convention, I found myself in the midst of an All Saints celebration, Mexican style: *El Dia de Los Muertos*. The Day of the Dead takes remembrance a step further: those who have shuffled off this mortal coil come back for a visit once a year to reassure their loved ones of the continuity and permanence of our existence in Christ. As our Collect says, we are "knit together in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of Christ" and we beg for the "grace so to follow thy blessed saints, that we may come to those ineffable joys that thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee Amen." This is the Communion of Saints. People have been celebrating a Day of the Dead here in the Americas since long before Jesus' time. It was not *El Dia de los Muertos*, for there was no Spanish here until the 16th century, but interacting with those whose worldly lives had ended took place for untold centuries in Toltec and Kaqchikel, in Nahuatl and Quechua and

Chicomuceltec too. Today those traditions – for better and for worse -- blend with half a millennium of Christian influence to express the continuity of human existence outside our earthly tenure. This is the day above all others when we acknowledge our place on a continuum of physical and spiritual history that has no end.

One implication of this is that the gift of life is a commodity, a form of currency God uses to do good in the world through us. And the power of that goodness can continue well beyond our earthly lives. Just think of the good that we have experienced in our lifetimes – some of us have to think harder than others – goodness that often continues to nurture us long after its purveyors have died. They and their deeds not gone from our hearts though they have long gone from our hands. It's just that from now on, as the Kiswahili has it, *Kuonana kwaolewa*: 'All our meetings will be arranged by God.' I'm headed to Washington DC this afternoon to be part of an African ceremony so please indulge a couple proverbs. From now on, *Kuonana kwaolewa*: 'All our meetings will be arranged by God.' So if the good and its adherent relationships continue outside the parameters of human time and biology, why is there so much talk about hope? What more could we hope for if our loves never end? What does the scripture mean by 'The last day' anyway? What are we waiting for?

The waiting -- life on Planet Earth -- is for our spiritual enrichment. This is our home, but it is also our wilderness; it's boot camp for Heaven. God gives us people life because God knows the ebb and flow of joy and sorrow, of struggle and satisfaction, of love and loss will challenge, nourish and fulfill us – fill us full. Another source of rich amazement in the Steinbeck Museum is the array of exhibits of his books and their origins. His *magnum opus*: *East of Eden* has its own room. The book explores themes of depravity, beneficence, love, the

struggle for acceptance, greatness, and the capacity for self-destruction and especially guilt and freedom. It ties these themes together with references to and many parallels with the *Book of Genesis*, especially Chapter 4, the story of Cain and Abel.

One of the displays in the *East of Eden* room is a wooden box, about the size of a top dresser drawer, that Steinbeck himself carved for a friend. Cut into its lid is the Hebrew word, *Timshel*, "Thou mayest," which Steinbeck describes as the central theme of his novel. God says "*Timshel*" to Cain while kicking him out into the wilderness – east of Eden -- for killing his brother: "From now on, thou mayest rule over sin." Which means he gets to choose his character from now on, and so do we. Harry Truman famously bowdlerized Mark Twain thusly: "Fame is a vapor, popularity is an accident; riches take wing; those who cheer today may curse tomorrow and only one thing endures: character." When we choose to develop good character by following Jesus towards goodness, we become permanently connected to all the saints, past, present and future who have done the same.

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. It is in baptism that a resemblance develops between those who follow and the One who leads the way. Our human minds cannot rightly thread the maze of this life unless we pursue the same path Jesus did. By maze, I mean that prison of death that leaves no exit and encloses us. However, although Nature does not allow us an exact or entire imitation, our sins are indeed suppressed by the sign of death lent by water in baptism. Sin is not completely wiped away, but there is a kind of break in the continuity of evil."

Who here doesn't want a kind – any kind --break in the continuity of evil? We know sin is not completely wiped away. That would be an understatement. Everybody is in on the action too. Nature does not allow us an entire imitation; sin-free living has yet to be accomplished by anybody purely human. Which means God's stake in this commodity market called humanity is a risky one; an aggressive investment I think is the term. Even though God really wants a big profit from this venture, God will not manipulate the market or trade inside and force the outcome. But an outcome is predicted, it's prophesied: ultimately, goodness will prevail. That is what is meant by the 'Last Day,' a day when all manner of things will be well – all will be well.

We have to grow to be honest and fair traders if we are to claim allegiance to Christ. We are the ones who have to choose righteousness; it's an inside job. We must because we may. Otherwise, there will be no break in the continuity of evil. Here, in his forward to *The Pogo Papers*, the great Walt Kelly gave a famous description of the issue:

“ Traces of nobility, gentleness and courage persist in all people, however much we try to stamp out the trend. So, too, persist those characteristics which are ugly and mean. In the clumsy hands of a cartoonist, all are equal; all traits become ridiculous. This leads to a irate, self-conscious, angry talk and the desire to join battle. There is no need for any of us to sally forth unto foreign fields however for the things that make us human are curiously enough, all too close at hand. Resolve then, that on this very ground, with our little flags waving to the sounds of tinny blasts from 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 the good in the world if it is to be worked at all, then perhaps we can say that to be lifted up is to become a citizen of a different society than most obvious and instinctive choice in front of us. To be lifted up is to embrace another culture from the one we so often reported on in the news, depicted in entertainment and advertised for sale. Our desire, our longing for connection with a living Christ whose story proves beyond doubt that goodness transcends death is the passport to this culture. Our response to God's invitation: "*Timshel*; Thou mayest," determines our spiritual nationality. When we say, "Yes, please," we are 'lifted up.'

Maybe we don't remember Chuck Dederich of the cult, "Church of Synanon, but everyone remembers his motto: "Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life." It's catchy, it's exciting, it's motivating, and it's rational. But if there's one thing this season of Halloween, All Saints, All Souls, El Dia de Los Muertos makes us aware of, it's that we are part of something beyond rationality and thought, far bigger than our careers here in the Kasbah. As they say in Tanzania, "*Ajali Muhuli*: Our fate is but an interval;" rationality only gets us so far. Once we enter a baptized life, we are connected beyond space and time, all the better to pursue goodness. If our baptism came when we were babies, via a choice made by our parents, we must choose again ourselves. Today would be a fine time to start. And while every day is a fine day to renew that choice, once we make it it is a permanent choice; we are marked as Christ's own forever. Chuck was wrong. The day we choose to be part of Christ is the only first day of the rest of our lives.

This human life, wherever it is on the continuum of our spiritual existence, certainly contains crossroads, pivot points

where our response to God's invitation propels us down roads either toward or away from goodness. But we cannot know -- cannot even conceive of -- the length or destinations of those roads, or the extent of time ahead of us; so there is no remainder to our lives, there is only eternity.

All the time that's gone before can be measured, more or less. Human history is X hundred-thousand years (or a mere 6 thousand depending on whom you're voting for), plus the segment of one's own lifetime before choosing to believe these words: "You shall all be taught by God. All who come to me are drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise them up on the last day." The time that's been and gone before, that's the rest of my life; the time ahead is forever now; it is eternity. Which means today isn't the first day of the rest of my life, it's the last day of the rest of my life. This is the last day, and we are being raised up now, as much as we desire and choose to be, each and every one of us. And so we say, "*Bwana Asifiwe!*" Praise the Lord.