

Sermon Manuscript – November 6, 2016 @ Our Saviour – Croton-on-Hudson

Lord, may the words of my mouth, and the meditation upon all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, my God, my Rock and my Redeemer, AMEN!

Autumn is the time for homecoming, the annual small town ritual where the local high school and its football team have a special weekend dedicated on their calendar, usually scheduled around a football game, where alumni are welcomed home and honored. Homecomings have rich traditions including parades, dances, tailgate parties, the coronation of homecoming kings and queens, and other fun and celebratory activities. The significance of homecoming is mani-fold. First, homecoming is often scheduled on a weekend following the football team being on the road, so the team is welcomed home for this special game. Often, but not always, the game is scheduled against a weaker opponent, so the team can feast on some home-cooking and celebrate a win as well as the homecoming. Alumni are invited and this is particularly meaningful for the previous year's Senior Class, many of whom have left home for the first time in their young lives to attend college. For many, this is the first time coming back home, reconnecting with family, friends, food and the foundational community that supported them through a good part of their lives. I've often heard from people that the first trip home after being away is an important spiritual time because they can see tangibly that while they have moved on with their lives, facing much change in college life, their homes, beds, communities, families and institutions have not changed and are still there for them.

My nephew Michael was a starting linebacker as a senior last year for Dobbs Ferry High School. I spoke with him yesterday and he remembers how emotional he was when he marched in his last homecoming parade as a member of the team. After graduation in June, Mike made his move to Morgantown, West Virginia and began life there as a student in mid-

August. He returned home in mid-October for Dobbs Ferry's homecoming weekend, his first trip back after two months at school. He told me how those emotions from a year ago were rekindled when he put on his jersey and joined other alumni at the head of the parade from the High School to the football field. But most important for him was reconnecting with his family, and friends and surprising his mother (Ann Marie's sister, Sandra) who did not expect him to travel back for the weekend. That was a deep and enduring image of homecoming, especially since Michael's father, John, had joined the saints in heaven when Michael was very young.

I think the season of autumn is an image of homecoming all on its own. With a new school year starting, families returning after summer vacation trips, crispness in the air, and the changing of foliage, we sense a movement indoors, a movement toward warmth, hearty foods, fireplaces ablaze, and the promise of family gatherings at home over the upcoming holidays. It's the time for Oktoberfest like the one we celebrated last week at our church home with dark malty beer, spicy sausages, and joyful folk songs. These images are even more rich in our Hudson River towns like Dobbs Ferry and Croton with the wideness of the flowing river opening up the grandeur of fall landscapes, and the great estates along the river transformed in both natural and not-so-natural ways. This celebration of homecoming awakens something primal within our hearts, a longing for belonging – a calling to return to the very base of our happiness – a yearning for the comforts of returning home.

When I look at All Saints Sunday, I envision that it too is time when we turn our hearts toward home, when we give thanks for the lives of those who have arrived at their eternal home, and when we are reminded of where our spiritual home is right now, and in the times to come. Home in the heart of God, home in the life of Jesus and his call to discipleship.

We see Jesus very much at home in today's gospel. We know he's quite comfortable speaking and teaching in small groups and large crowds, and he is at home, even when some of

the content of his preaching is negative, perhaps accusatory at times. For some of you, the content of the first part of the text may sound familiar because it is similar to the more well-known Beatitudes, a list of counter-cultural blessings that Jesus preaches during the Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew. In Luke, however, the setting of Jesus' preaching is not on a Mount, but on a Plain – that Jesus and his disciples have come down from retreating to the top of a mountain, and have returned home – to level ground – to where the people have gathered to hear Jesus – and to be healed by Jesus. The image of mount and plain is more than topographical, it is symbolic of the “down to earth” nature of Luke's beatitudes, and of the prophetic claims of reversal found throughout the Old Testament, and proclaimed in Mary's Magnificat, and now fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus. Coming down from the mountain is a reminder of who Christ truly is – God incarnate – God's Word in human flesh now living, talking, teaching and healing among us. It is a reminder to us that God leaves home to be at home with the people God loves.

At home on the plain, Jesus' words contain no language which allows us to spiritually reinterpret these blessings and the matching woes. In Luke's version of the Beatitudes, we don't hear theological rhetoric coming from Jesus, but social commentary directed at those who may be just too much at home in a social system that comforts the comfortable and perpetuates the poverty-ridden. To get the attention of these so-called disciples, Jesus heaps God's blessings on those the world does not consider blessed - the poor, the hungry, the mourning and the persecuted. Jesus promises to them the opposite of their current experience – that God (who often is portrayed as having no partiality) is indeed partial to those who are suffering and those who are outcast. If Jesus were to stop and only provide blessings, it might lead us to overly-spiritualize the teachings and count on God to simply cure the problems of the

suffering in the end-times, and for the comfortable to urge the suffering to persevere in hope, without the offer of direct help.

That Jesus does not stop at the blessings is significant for us to notice, as he casts four corresponding woes, really curses, to counterbalance the blessings. These are tough teachings, particularly hard for those living in relative comfort, having homes that provide the foundation for living, for nurturing, for prosperity and for safety, things much of the world lacks. Yet, even though they are hard teachings, because they are Jesus' words, we know they really mean good news for us! Jesus grabs our attention with these curses, on the rich, the happy, the sated and the reputable. He gets our attention because he wants us to notice – to see those who don't have the benefits of home and calls us to help guide them home now, and not just wait for the future when we know all be welcomed to the final home with our loving and generous God.

And while Jesus talks about that ultimate homecoming, the day when we will rejoice and leap for joy, home is not just a faraway place we wait patiently to see. Home is something we are called to make now in Jesus' name. I think the things we remember most about the saints who have passed before us are the acts of kindness they did for others. When I think of my grandmother who died just 2 years ago, a few months short of her 100th birthday, I remember a woman who with my grandfather was approaching the "empty nest" period of her life, was suddenly visited by her daughter and 2 small children needing a place to live after the young family was split apart. There wasn't a lot of money in those days, and we were quite a burden on my grandparents, but I remember my grandmother as a hero in my life, because of the way she sacrificed her life for her family, and made a home for us, a home where I felt the presence of Jesus in her generosity, her resourcefulness, her wisdom and her love. I remember Nana as a saint, for the way she treated others, as she would have wanted to be treated.

So, after blessings and woes, Jesus goes on to describe what true home looks like if we as disciples were to build that home here and now, and not wait for that eternal solution. Jesus wants us to build a home, not for our own comfort and protection, but a home based on a foundation of loving and serving others, and not just those who might do this to us in return, but to love and serve our enemies, people who dislike us, want to do harm to us, take from us, even misuse what we might give them. Indeed, home is the place, where we do to and for others, as we would like done to us.

One of the great saints of the Church was Lutheran Pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If you hang around me long enough, you'll hear me refer very often to his writings and his life. While in prison for his participation in a failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler, and in the final months of his life, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter that he understood that "Jesus was the man for others" and since the church was the very existence of Jesus, it too can only truly be church when it exists for others. He goes on to describe the church is the provider of blessings in same way Jesus gave blessings in the Sermon on the plain. He writes:

God does not repay evil for evil, and thus the righteous should not do so either. No judgment, no abuse, but blessing...Blessing means laying one's hand on something and saying, Despite everything, you belong to God. This is what we do with the world that inflicts such suffering on us. We do not abandon it; we do not repudiate, despise or condemn it. Instead we call it back home to God, we give it hope, we lay our hand on it and say: may God's blessing come upon you, may God renew you; be blessed, world created by God, you who belong to your Creator and Redeemer. We have received God's blessing in happiness and in suffering. Yet those who have been blessed can do nothing but pass on this blessing; indeed, they must be a blessing wherever they are. They must call people to come home.

In a few minutes, we will remember saints that have lived with us and have now been called home by God. We remember them not so much for the blessings they now receive with God in eternity, but in how they blessed us during time in their earthly home. We remember them as they are gathered by the river of life, for their example which calls us to be blessings for others, to be Christ for others, here along the Hudson River and at all the rivers of the world God has created, the world we call home.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guide our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen!