

Thomas R. Cook
Sermon #463 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, Pennsylvania
8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Sunday after All Saints' Day – November 4, 2007

“Life in the Whirlwind”

Scripture: Luke 6:20-36; All Saints' Day II – Year C

It doesn't really seem fair. Maybe somehow it doesn't seem just. We arrive at this special day of celebration of the saints, the famous people of the Christian faith who often sacrificed everything to be good people, to be faithful to God's calling in their lives. We lavish them with praise for making the right choices and being the right kind of people. Yet Jesus kind of rains on the parade when he rather bluntly and boldly point out to his disciples that God is, well, God is "...kind to the ungrateful and the wicked", and that we are supposed to be too, we're supposed to "...love our enemies, do good and lend, expected nothing in return." We're supposed to be merciful to others, because God is too. So what's the great benefit of all this sainthood if it only gets you the same things as it gets the ungrateful and the wicked?

Well, that's really all part of the point, isn't it? It's the entire foundation upon which *our* hope rests. Do you think the saints were all fine folks, just waiting around for God to notice they needed a halo? Hardly. The saints may realize more

than anyone, just how valuable is that kindness which God shows to the ungrateful and the wicked, for while they may have ended up famous for their faith, they certainly didn't all start that way. The apostle Paul, whose letter to the Ephesians we read this morning, the first international Christian evangelist starting churches all over the Roman empire, even Paul began as an enemy of Christ, a persecutor of the church, one who condoned the imprisonment and killing of Christians, one who stood by and saw these executions occur. Or St. Augustine, who spent much of his life in revelry and self indulgence before somewhat reluctantly giving it all up for his faith. Or Francis of Assisi who was a soft and coddled young man from a wealthy family who took little interest in the poor and destitute in his earlier life, instead hanging out with his rich friends, or trying to earn fame as a soldier. Where would they be without God's kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked? And where would we be? I gather we might have some issues as well, unless we really feel we have never lacked gratitude or never done anyone harm or always have done the right thing. I, for one, am a fan of God's mercy.

You know what All Saints' Day makes me think of? All Saints' Day makes me think not of goodness and kindness and peacefulness and light. It makes me think more of stormy weather. Men and women in their various and ordinary walks of life who found themselves suddenly in the path of a tornado of faith,

lifted up by the whirlwind, spun around, and returned to the ground a different person. Think of Paul, or Francis, or even Mother Teresa, a woman of our own time, whose skills of persuasion and organization may have netted her a prominent position in the global economic power structure, but who found herself spun onto a path which compelled her to sacrifice any gain and pleasure for herself in order to live with and serve the poorest and sickest of the people in India and other lands.

These people are our family in faith; these are the people with whom we share a call to be like Christ. And lest we believe they have some extraordinary calling that we could never undertake, just listen to what Jesus asks of us this morning: Love your enemies? Turn the other cheek? Lend, expecting nothing in return? Blessed are the poor? Blessed are the hungry and sorrowful? All these things cut against the grain of what we hold to be real. They're spun around backwards.

How often we hear Christians equate wealth with blessing, when Jesus proclaims just the opposite. How often we hear that we must strike the enemy to protect ourselves, when Jesus teaches just the opposite. How greatly our economy revolves around the profit some gain through the debts of others, when Jesus says to lend and expect nothing in return. It's as if we are moving along the path that

we call ordinary life and a great whirlwind sweeps over us and picks us up and spins us around, and sets us down again with a new perspective on an old way of living. Jesus is a whirlwind.

But its kind of strange... the Old Testament often refers to the presence of the Spirit of God as *ruach*, that is, breath or even wind. And how often I have envisioned this wind of the Spirit as a cool and gentle breeze on a hot and sultry day, when Jesus portrays the will of the Spirit more like the raging whirlwind that storms into our lives and spins us around and asks us to see our world in entirely different, and conspicuously challenging, ways.

What does it take to be a saint of God? I suppose it takes a willingness to walk in the whirlwind, to open our hearts and minds to a different way, to strive to follow in the way of Jesus. And that isn't always a glamorous and easy thing. You know, we proclaim the saints as heroes in our day, but in their own, the world often proclaimed them losers. The saints embraced peace when war was the order of the day; they walked into the towns and villages ravaged by disease while others ran away; often they gave up wealth and power to become poor and often they died in witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. Not all of us will be called to such extraordinary witness. But we are all called to wrestle with the challenge of life as

Jesus sees it; to witness to another way of seeing our enemies or using our moneys or sharing our belongings. And to walk this path in faith is enough for God to use us as saints, to spin us around and make us holy witnesses to a more excellent way.

Who knows? You all may look pretty good in a halo...