

All Saints Day
November 4, 2017
The Rev. Emily Richards

One Drop of Water

All Saints Day is a day set aside by the Church where we gather to celebrate, reflect and offer thanks for the faithful who have gone before us, those who have shaped our journeys by the journeys they walked. Women and men, who have loved us, encouraged us and inspired us so much so that we can't help but want to do the same for others. Those who opened themselves to the ways God worked in their particular lives and with their particular gifts and from whom we still draw encouragement as we seek to travel our own path, striving to serve God and one another in our own day.

I've always appreciated that on All Saints Day we hear the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, what we call The Beatitudes. Jesus is launching his ministry, casting his vision for his work and those who are to follow him. And how does he do this? By saying, "Blessed are the meek and merciful and poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn and who are persecuted." Often, we misinterpret these words of Jesus as commands-something we ought to be doing or becoming. But, the Beatitudes are not directives. They are statements- describing what is. Jesus is "calling things like he sees them." In them he is teaching his disciples and us that it is in the midst of our sorrows and afflictions and poverty and generosity, our hunger for a deeper relationship with God and one another, and in our longing for peace that God and God's kingdom is to be found. Jesus reminds us that it is in our very human nature, in our ordinary lives that the extraordinary happens, that the Kingdom is able to shine forth. "What we celebrate when we celebrate All Saints is not the superhuman faith and power of a select few but is God's ability to use flawed people to do divine things," writes Nadia Bolz-Weber. "We celebrate the fact that God creates faith in God's people, and those people through ordinary acts of love, reveal the Kingdom of Heaven."

Today is an especially poignant All Saints' Celebration because we are honoring the Thrift and Gift Shop and its thirty-five-year ministry in our community. At a special meeting of the Board of the Women of St. Peter's on February 23, 1982 the idea of opening a Shop was presented. With the mounting surplus of items from the annual

Christmas Bazaars and with a growing need to bring in more income to the Church these women took their idea to the Rector at the time, the Rev. Paul Twelves and then to the Vestry. I've heard from Jeanne Robson that Rev. Twelves didn't think this Shop would be a successful ministry, but was persuaded otherwise by Doris DeKalb and some of the other women. It was after all Doris, Phyllis Kelley and Sue Wright who were the forces and inspiration behind its initial launch. And for those of us who knew and loved these women, nothing and no one would be able to stop them; once they got an idea in their head. The Shop opened in September and at the end of the year they distributed \$5,000: half to the St. Peter's General Fund and half to ministries beyond our walls –one of the very first being Episcopal Community Services. An auspicious beginning to a ministry that thrived for decades. As of last week's Rummage Sale, the Thrift Shop has made more than \$500,000. Just take a glance at the leaflet insert and you'll see how many organizations we supported, how many people were served through this work, how many lives were potentially made better. One of the things I so appreciated about this ministry is that from its very beginning it had the vision of looking beyond itself and the church's needs by giving away half of its annual proceeds. Generosity and compassion in action.

Another legacy of this ministry was that it lived out our baptismal promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, respecting the dignity of every human being. Through the gift of hospitality, individuals and families could come and shop in a lovely place, enjoying the experience without having to spend a lot of money. I know that many of our Friday Rummage Sale shoppers have been truly grateful for this opportunity because they don't have a lot of money to spend and are always able to find such nice things for themselves and those they love.

Finally, a part of the legacy of the Shop which could be overlooked, but is no less significant is that it empowered the women of this parish. Back in 1982 women had only been able to serve on the Vestry or as a parish representative to Diocesan Convention or to our National Convention for a little over a decade and women who even considered embracing a call as ordained clergy could do so for less than decade. The Thrift Shop ministry gave women of all ages and all stages in life a real opportunity to serve as valued leaders of the church. It is because of all the church Thrift Shops and Episcopal Church Women's groups and UTO ministries that I am even able to stand before you as

your Rector. I stand on the shoulders of the women who have come before me in this parish and in the other parishes I served and the one I grew up in, who had the vision to start something new and the courage to say to their Rectors and Vestrymen we have something to offer in service to this church and to the glory of God. *Blessed are the Marthas and the Marys and the Sarahs and the Phoebes; for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.*

Today's celebration is bittersweet because a week ago The Thrift Shop closed its doors after all these years of fruitful ministry. I believe it took as much courage for the women on the Board to make the decision back in January to end this ministry as it did for Doris, Phyllis and Sue and the others to bring the idea to Rev. Twelves. *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh.* It is fitting the Shop closed its doors on the heels of All Saints Day. Because this occasion is one which our rejoicing is also tinged with our sense of loss. We give thanks for those who loved us and inspired us and also acknowledge the grief we carry as they are no longer with us. Every time we name our loved ones among the saints, we honor not only their lives but our own, honest struggle with memories both painful and joyful. The beauty of this day is that in solidarity with one another we can offer up both the joy and the pain we feel. And in that offering, somehow, we are given the hope to begin again. Our late Phyllis Kelley, whom we only buried two days ago told her son that as sad as she was about the closing of the Shop, she was also filled with great hope. She was hopeful that this new generation of women through *On Gracie's Wings* could share their particular gifts and skills to reach out to our community, serving families and children in need- a new opportunity to continue the legacy begun all those years ago among the wonderful women of St. Peter's.

" In God in the Moment: Making Every Day a Prayer, Kathy Coffey recalls this image: 'A priest who, when asked, 'How many people were at the early celebration of the Eucharist last Wednesday morning?' replied, 'There were three ladies, the caretaker, several thousand archangels, a large number of seraphim, and several million of the triumphant saints of God.' Such a 'cloud of witnesses' answers a deep human urge to be part of something larger, she writes, to not stand alone, to give our little lives meaning. One drop of water, left alone, evaporates quickly. But one drop of water in the immense sea endures." On this day, we remember that we are part of something larger than ourselves; that we are not called to live our lives of faith in isolation. As the body of

Christ, we are inextricably connected to one another, those living and those dead, those whose names we know and those whose names we do not yet know, those who worship with us in these pews and those who will never make their way here. We find ourselves amidst a cloud of witnesses, a "great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

And so, we give thanks for that great cloud of witnesses: the women and the men who served faithfully in the ministry of The Thrift and Gift Shop; for all the women and men of this parish who generation after generation witnessed to God's gracious blessings and so been blessings to the world in their ordinary lives. We give thanks for those we love but see no longer, believing that for them life is changed, not ended. May the legacy of all the saints of God, continue afresh through our work and our witness. One drop of water, left alone, evaporates quickly. But one drop of water in the immense sea endures. *Amen.*