

November 5, 2006 - The Sunday after All Saints' Day
The Observances of All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day
The Rev. Patricia Millard

Sirach 44:1-14

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

Earlier this week, in preparing for today's sermon, I was reading an article written by Bill Adams, who was my liturgics professor from seminary. The article was about language: how language forms the community of faith, and specifically, it was an argument for the use of inclusive language in the context of worship.

Bill writes that inclusive language is not about "political correctness," nor is it simply a matter of style. For Bill, just "Fixing the words," is not the point. The real point, he says, is that inclusive language is an issue of justice and godly mercy."

Now at first blush, justice and inclusive language don't seem to connect with All Saints' and All Souls' Days. But I read the article anyway, and all of a sudden, this one particular paragraph jumps out at me, and the whole focus of the article shifted in my mind.

The paragraph was a quote from a book called "Praying With Our Eyes Open," by Marjorie Proctor Smith, a simple, yet very insightful reflection on how women read.

It's a good quote, and worth sharing with you this morning:

"We grow accustomed ... to translating as we go, reading ourselves into the text from which we have been excised... reading behind the texts, reading the silences and the spaces, the absences and the omissions. We learn to hear words not spoken aloud, see signs unread by others. And we learn to keep our reading to ourselves." (21st 234)

Let's just stop here for a moment.

Has it "jumped out" for you, as it did with me last week, that this is exactly what many of us have already done this morning? We probably did it almost automatically,

"Translating as we go, reading ourselves into the text from which we have been excised..."

Let me re-read the first sentence of today's reading:

[Ecclesiasticus 44:1-2] Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. ²The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning...

Let's be clear on this one – Ben Sira, the author of Ecclesiasticus, did not say "men" while really meaning "all people" –

quite the contrary, the text says "men" because it means "men." If we read the whole chapter, it would be even clearer, because what follows is a list of the accomplishments of famous men in the history of Israel.

And this isn't "narratively neutral," because in leaving out any mention of women, the text seems to assume that the only stories worth telling, the only accomplishments worth remembering, have to do with the lives and stories of men.

And not just "men," but men of privilege,
men who "rule in their kingdoms," men who "make a name for themselves,"
"rich men, endowed with resources," and also, expanding the list of those being left out,
"men who marry, and beget children to carry on their names."

As we think about this, we may be realizing that an uncritical reading of this particular text writes many, if not most of us, clear out of the story.

Now obviously many of us deal with this by just reading the passage a little differently.

As Marjorie Proctor Smith pointed out,
we "re-translate" as we go,
we read "behind" the text,
and we manage to "write ourselves back into the story."

But let's face it, there are many people out there who never manage to write themselves back into the story. Because the truth is that we live in a world that continues to disallow the stories of the powerless, a world where many remain voiceless, ignored, and forgotten.

In fact, if this extraordinarily sacred task, "the telling of stories" were left entirely in human hands, our human brokenness would ensure that, for the most part, only the stories of the powerful would be remembered and told.

This Sunday, as we observe the Days of All Saints and All Souls, I am profoundly struck at the contrast between this very broken way in which humanity tells, or doesn't tell, the stories of its people, and the radically different way in which these same stories are held by God.

Today's Good News is that,

IN Christ, ALL of our stories are told, and nobody gets left out.

IN Christ, we are knit together into ONE community, a community where even physical death is not a barrier, because, when we get to essence of things, in the Resurrected life, there is no longer a distinction between "physical life" and "physical death."

To quote Paul,

Romans 14:8-9 ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

So if it is true that we pray for the dead, it is also and equally true that we pray WITH the dead, and that the "dead" pray with us, and for us as well. That is why today's Collect says "you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord." Later in the service, our Eucharistic Prayer will add that "in the multitude of your saints you have surrounded us with a great cloud of witnesses, that we might rejoice in their fellowship."

Again, in the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven, none of our stories gets forgotten, and we are ALL “part of the story.” Together, we join our voices “with angels and archangels” in a chorus of love and adoration about the throne of God. Together, we toil for the inbreaking of God’s kingdom into ALL of reality. We work together with those who have come before us, even here at St. Wilfrid’s! Next week, for example, we have Commitment Sunday, and as we move through our visioning process, we do so with each other, and with those who have been here before. And together, we celebrate God’s activity in all the world, as so many of us did yesterday as Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori being instituted as our Presiding Bishop.

“If we live, we live to the Lord” and “if we die, we die to the Lord” – There is no distinction! Without Christ, we are “dead” even in life. And IN Christ, there is simply no more death! This is a tall order, because the invitation this morning is, as always, a fuller living into the Resurrected life that has begun already. This is exactly what we celebrate every time we do Eucharist together!

So today, we pray for those who have died, trusting that these very same ones we pray for, pray for us as well. Today, we remember the people whose stories never made it into the calendar, trusting that, in Christ, theirs and our stories will also be held in God’s eternity. Today, we celebrate the writing of EVERYBODY back into the story of God’s redemption, God’s power, and God’s love.

Sirach 44:1-14 Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. ² The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning. ³ There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; ⁴ those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction; ⁵ those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; ⁶ rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes-- ⁷ all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. ⁸ Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. ⁹ But of others there is no memory; they have perished as though they had never existed; they have become as though they had never been born, they and their children after them. ¹⁰ But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; ¹¹ their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children's children. ¹² Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake. ¹³ Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. ¹⁴ Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation.

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

² I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, ³ saying, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads." ⁴ And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel.

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" ¹¹ And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; ¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Matthew 5:1-12 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you