

Richmond Hill
Richmond, Virginia
1 November 2010
All Saints' Day
Luke 6:20-26
The Beatitudes
The Rev. B. P. Campbell

We carry our souls with us

Jesus looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." (*Luke 6:20-26*)

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Surrounded by the saints in heaven and on earth
We seek poverty in a land of extravagance,
The blessing of simplicity in religious community.*

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I've been thinking about what it is we carry in our backpacks as Christians. We go through our lives from place to place, from period to period, from situation to situation. Sometimes we are doing well. Sometimes we are doing poorly. Sometimes we are successful. Sometimes we are failing. Sometimes we are afraid. Sometimes we are confident. Sometimes we have exactly what we need. Sometimes we have far too much and have to choose what we need. And sometimes we do not seem to have what we need.

In all of these things; in all of these times and places; in all of our expeditions and movements in this journey through place and time, through days and weeks and years, however, there is something we are carrying with us. It is that which we carry in our backpack – that on which we feed, that which sustains us, that which is the

constant truth of our lives no matter where we are. It is that spiritual wealth, that collection of insights, that formed or taught person, that learning self, -- and also that bag of wounds and rigidities, those old hates and denials, those deep disappointments. It is all of those things.

When you strip it all down, when you take away the money and the position and the trappings, there is someone there. Perhaps we should call it our soul. He or she carries a lot or a little. He or she is on a journey to God, whether or not he knows it. We are children, we are naked, we are learning. No matter whether we have a billion dollars or are desperate for our next meal, we are there naked before God and life.

This is the truth of life – the truth of creation. I wish I could express it some other way – because it is the frightening, base reality of life. And the only way it is at all bearable is to know that our citizenship is in heaven – now, and in the future.

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Tonight we are celebrating the great festival which the church calls “All Saints’ Day.” Much of the world does not know about the festival of “All Saints” -- the festival that the English called All Hallows. They know only of the eve of All Hallows, when spirits and frightening things were thought to rush about, and when people carried out various festivals to take away the fear of the terrifying things.

Here on All Saints’ Day we celebrate all of the saints – all of our ancestors and present colleagues in the faith. We celebrate that great fellowship which is both on this side and the other side of the great river of life – those with whom we are joined, even though we cannot see them in the flesh, and those with whom we are joined now even though we are not with them or cannot recognize them.

The church’s traditional Gospel reading for All Saints’ is the Beatitudes – either in their more familiar form from Matthew, or in the version we read tonight from Luke’s Gospel. And it is here we see the raw simplicity of the Gospel – we see where the rubber meets the road – and we are brought once again, and suddenly, to the description of our own spiritual formation, of that development in us which can be carried anywhere, which will last forever, which IS eternal life, life in the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus says, "for yours is the kingdom of God." Simply that. Some people are poor, and must learn the blessing. Some people must learn they are poor, before the blessing can be apparent to them. But this should be obvious to all of us: when you come to the edge of the river, and they put your ashes or your body in the ground, you are totally poor. There is absolutely nothing you can carry with you. And therefore, if there is no blessing in this poverty, there is no enduring blessing at all.

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We live in the midst of vast and desperate denial of the reality of which we speak. The elections in America display the anxiety of wealth to control, increase, and perpetuate itself. It's hard to believe that anything else is going on in these elections, although there are other issues which surface occasionally. The other night I saw an edition of the television show "60 Minutes" which was discussing the referendum in Washington State to have an income tax for the first time. Washington is one of only six states which does not have an income tax. The tax would be only on high incomes – beginning above \$400,000 for an individual or \$800,000 for a married couple. It was being supported by Bill Gates and his father. The corporations who are located in Washington state oppose it and are spending large amounts of money for advertisements against it. There would be no taxes on the corporations, only on their officers, but those officers will not even spend their own money to oppose the tax. The reason for the tax was the tremendous cuts in education expenditures which had been forced to happen in Washington State. The interviewer talked to several of the millionaires and billionaires who were opposed to the tax. They considered themselves entitled to all the money they wanted.

It was a stunning television show. It takes your breath.

There are many ironic turns of phrase in the language of monetary wealth. One of the most ironic is the phrase "security." You buy "securities." They are mobile. You can carry them wherever you go, from firm to firm, place to place. If you are intentional and subtle enough, you can hold them in a country or state where little or no tax is paid on their income. Only this: they have no security. They are not actually a part of your self, of the backpack which you carry from place to place. You can't take them with you. The magnitude of your portfolio may actually represent the magnitude of your poverty. Only it is hard to get the blessing of the poverty when you hide it with more and more material wealth.

Every once in awhile – and actually more often than one would suppose – you find a person who has come into significant material wealth who is earnestly struggling to make a difference for other citizens, for the poor, for the community. There is where you can see one of the most dramatic illustrations of the blessing of the poor. The wealthy man seeks to be a part of God's blessing of the poor, and in the process is receiving the blessing of the poor. If you have known people like this, you can see what I am talking about.

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Here at Richmond Hill we are a part of the great monastic movement – the great tradition in Christianity and other religions of religious communities which live simply and seek to witness to the blessing of God. This should certainly not be

overblown here. Even the small stipends which we receive, in the context of full room and board and health insurance, make our income higher than many other persons living in Church Hill. But it also should not be belittled. Most of you living here could be making more money elsewhere and would certainly have more personal freedom of a sort.

In our Rule of Richmond Hill, we do not even use the word “poverty,” because that is not the vow which we have taken. In its place we have the word “simplicity,” – a more accurate description of our commitment.

And yet, even in this vow, we see some of the benefits which come from a lack of monetized wealth. I’d like to close tonight’s sermon by identifying the benefits, as I understand them, -- the blessings, as it were, which relate to the relative poverty of this existence.

- Sharing. The wealth which we have is a wealth which is shared. Each of us lives in private space of 200-300 square feet a person. Yet we are stewards of a wonderful monastery of 45,000 square feet and a beautiful garden.
- Collectivity. Because we share our wealth, we have community with one another. We have the same kitchen, we eat together.
- Common work. The common life is too much for anyone to do by himself. It takes all of us. We profit from one another’s virtues and suffer from one another’s vices. We have to learn the life of the kingdom.
- Common prayer. We have the privilege of praying together, of being buoyed and supported in prayer, and by one another’s prayer.
- Hospitality. The only way to make this work in the spirit is to be hospitable to one another, and to find hospitality with those others who are here with us. We learn some real hospitality – its boundaries as well as its generosity.
- Humility. There is no way to be involved in this kind of enterprise without being brought to your own nakedness before God. You are constantly dependent on God’s daily guidance and the daily renewal of his call.

So those who come here and are called here, together with the people who have prayed here for centuries, and with those who are drawn here but do not live here -- all of us are brought into that holy fellowship which knows no barriers of time or place, income or station, physical life or death. It is, as we experience it, a taste of the kingdom of God. In place of all of the other things – the degrees, the status, the resume, the money – which we might carry with us; and also in place of the dark things we might carry – the self-negation and self-hatred, the ugly feelings and destructive desires, the futilities and apparent failures – in place of all these things, we carry the simple reality of God’s blessing,

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"Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus said, " for yours is the kingdom of God."
AMEN.