**Preaching Notes for the Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost (November1, 2015)**

**All Saints Day**

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*Alternative readings are assigned for* [***All Saints Day***](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=226)***;*** *but for the sake of preaching continuity, I have chosen to incorporate the celebration of saints into the notes on the readings assigned for the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost.*

**Ruth 1:1-18**

In a time of famine, Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons left Bethlehem for the land of Moab. Elimelech died in this foreign land, and his two sons married Moabite women. After ten years both sons died also, and all of Naomi’s hope was cut off.

In the days of Naomi and her family, it was a man’s world. A woman had no possibility of a career to support herself. A woman’s only hope was in finding a man who would marry her. Women were expected to keep house and produce children. Since Naomi’s husband died and she was too old to have any more children, and her two sons died without her daughters-in-law having produced any children, Naomi’s life was a failure in the eyes of the culture. The future lay before her as a dismal, meaningless stretch of time to be endured until death would finally and mercifully release her. She made the hard decision to return to Bethlehem, where she could at least live out the rest of her failed days surrounded by her own kinfolk. But she had no sooner set her face to do this than her widowed daughters-in-law appeared on her doorstep begging her to take them with her. She told them how it was. Even if she could manage to find another husband, she was too old to have two more sons. What were her daughters-in-law to do? Wait around hoping for her to do the impossible, to have two more sons, who would grow into men so that the girls could marry them? The truth was, Orpah and Ruth would have a better chance of finding another husband if they stayed in Moab.

So one of the daughters-in-law, Orpah, kissed Naomi goodbye and went on her way. But the other one, Ruth, spoke those poetic and memorable words:

Entreat me not to leave you,
*Or to* turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people *shall be* my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The Lord do so to me, and more also,
If *anything but* death parts you and me (Ruth 1:16-17, NKJV\*).

What makes Ruth’s speech so beautiful is that her words are so well-chosen, and her meaning is so clear. What makes this speech so beautiful is that it is about the very highest of human emotions, love, and they come from the heart of one who possesses the very highest character trait: faith.

So what is faith, and what good does it do someone like Ruth or Naomi? How does it put a roof over a person’s head and bread on the table? The writer of the book of Hebrews defines faith as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. And that turns out to be a pretty fair working definition in the case of Naomi and Ruth. Here was Naomi, defeated and hopeless because her husband had died, her only two sons had died childless, and there was no prospect of Naomi herself ever having any more children. Her genetic line was ended. There would be no grandchildren who carried the family name. She was a failure. Her purpose had been taken away. In the words of the ancient mindset, Naomi’s “reproach among women was almost too hard to bear.” And let’s not forget Ruth. She had lived ten years with Naomi’s son, Mahlon, and had failed to conceive. Now she was a widow and no longer young. What was she to do?

What she did was to act in faith. She counted on love. She put all her hope on Naomi, and not only on Naomi, but on Naomi’s God. She declared that she *belonged* to Naomi. “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

What does it mean to act in faith? It means to trust in the substance of things hoped for, on the evidence of things not seen. In the case of Ruth, it meant that she trusted in that unseen thing called character. Up until this point in the story of Ruth and Naomi, we know little about Naomi’s character, but it is obvious that Naomi’s character had impressed Ruth.

I think about the character of people who have impressed me and why they have impressed me. There have been many, and some I have written about in this space before. Right now, I am thinking of Pope Francis. I write these words on the third day of the Pope’s historic visit to the United States. I have found myself completely mesmerized by this man and his witness. He truly is a holy man. I did not watch all the coverage, but I did tune in and listen as he was addressing Congress, and I watched as people lined up along the streets of our nation’s capital to get a glimpse of him in person. I watched as he repeatedly zeroed in on a child or a person with disabilities. I watched as he went out of his way to speak to and touch the “least of these” among the crowds. I watched as he led the Vesper service at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City. My husband and I were moved by his pastoral heart as he offered words of condolence to Islamic brothers and sisters who had suffered terrible losses in an out-of-control crowd during the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca. We were captivated and inspired by his sermon. He is bold and fearless and brilliant and at the same time, humble and gentle and compassionate. Never in my life have I had so much respect and hope for the future of the Christian faith as I’ve felt since Francis took the papal office. Truly he deserves his title and position as a world leader for such a time as this.

Isn’t it utterly amazing what faith can do? Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Faith is a very powerful thing.

Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that faith is a matter of believing in facts, like the fact that God exists, or the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. But that is not what faith is about. Faith is not a matter of just believing that a certain person or being exists. It is a matter of believing *in* that person or being. It is a matter not only of believing in that non-substantial thing called character, but of being so attracted to that character that you want to belong to that person. Faith is to choose to belong to someone else because that person is gracious and steadfast and has great character.

Maybe we should say that faith is not so much about believing as it is about belonging. Ultimately, faith is about belonging to God. But are we not first led to pursue a relationship with God by people of character? People who not only believe in God, but who are committed to God and show us the very character of God by the way they live and love. We are led to God by people who *belong* to God.

On this All Saints Day, as we think about the story of Ruth and Naomi, let us remember and celebrate the saints we’ve known who belonged to God, and whose commitment, character, and witness have led us on the path to follow God revealed in Jesus Christ.

[**Hebrews 9:11-14**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=227#epistle_reading)

If you’ve been following my notes on Hebrews over the past few weeks, you know that I have been railing against the notion of sacrificial atonement. But this week it becomes impossible to avoid the blood any longer. Indeed, the word “blood” is used four times in these four verses. What can wash away my sins? “Nothin’ but the blood of Jesus!”

So although I would like to be able to dismiss all of this business about blood, I cannot entirely. There is truth in those old blood hymns whether I like it or not. What I can do is provide some context for this statement from Hebrews that says, “he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12 NRSV).

I have already written about the importance of blood sacrifice in the Jewish temple in terms of the priestly role in those rituals. Since our Jewish neighbors recently observed Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, on September 22-23, and since the recipients of this letter would have had great familiarity with temple sacrificial rituals, I thought it might be both helpful and illuminating to review the meaning of ritual sacrifice in Judaism as we consider this passage.

The Day of Atonement is the most important holy day of the year for our Jewish brothers and sisters. In Jesus’ day, just like in our own time, people were deeply troubled by their own personal sins. Just like people today, they were concerned about the way they were living. They were worried about their sins and bad behaviors and their inability to make changes that were permanent. Like us, they felt helpless and guilty and upset because they had made promises to themselves and to others that they just couldn’t keep.

One of the ways that the Jewish people in Jesus’ day, and in our time as well, dealt with their sins was through the annual observance of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the culmination of a ten-day period of reflection, repentance, and return known as teshuvah, or the days of awe, that begins on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and ends on Yom Kippur. On this day the people gathered at the temple to fast and pray and have their sins taken away. It was an important ritual, which in Jesus’ time was done in three parts. (Read more about it in Leviticus 16.)

First, a young bull was brought into the temple. The high priest laid his hands on the bull’s head and confessed his own sins and the sins of the entire priesthood. Then he slaughtered the bull and took the blood and a container of incense and entered the Holy of Holies. With a censer of live coals in his right hand and a container of incense in his left hand, he approached the Ark of the Covenant, set the censer on the poles of the Ark, left it there, and retired from the Holy of Holies to pray, but only for a very brief time, lest the people become terrified. After the prayer, he re-entered the Holy of Holies, took the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkled it seven times on the ark to cover the sins of the priests. Then he came out.

In the next part, two identical rams were brought in, and the priest stood in front of them. He thrust his hands into a special urn, where he brought out, in each hand, a slip of paper. One slip was marked, “For God, and the other marked, “For Azazel,” which means “For a scapegoat.” Holding these slips, he brought his hands down on the heads of the rams as he stood before them and uttered a dedication: “To the Lord!” At this point a scarlet thread was tied around the neck of the scapegoat.

Then the priest slaughtered the ram for the Lord and with its blood he entered the Holy of Holies for a third time to sprinkle the Ark of the Covenant seven times with the sacrifice of the people. Next, the priest returned to the front where he exchanged the vessel with the ram’s blood for the one with the blood of the bull. He stood before the curtain of the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the curtain seven times with the priest’s sacrifice and then, once more, taking up the ram’s blood, he sprinkled the curtain seven times with the people’s sacrifice.

In the final part of the ritual, the priest laid his hands on the scapegoat while he confessed the sins of the people. He turned the scapegoat over to a man who was appointed to lead it away. According to the tradition, the route led over the valley of Kidron into the wilderness of Judea. At the end of the route, at the edge of a cliff, the attendant tied the other end of the scarlet thread that was around the scapegoat’s neck to a rock, and then pushed the animal over the cliff to its death. At the very moment that the scapegoat fell to his death, the news of the completion of the rite was relayed back to the temple by the crowds of people stationed all along the route. According to the legend, a scarlet thread tied to the threshold of the Holy of Holies turned white at the very moment that the scapegoat was pushed over the cliff, which signaled that the people were cleansed of their sins.

So, as you can see, in Jesus’ time, people took their sins very seriously; and on the Day of Atonement, they went to great lengths to go before God to be ritually cleansed. Jewish people in our day continue to take this day and this ritual seriously. Synagogue attendance records indicate that this is the most widely attended holiday service of the year.

So, when the writer of Hebrews says that “he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), he is saying that Jesus is God’s once-and-for-all gift that will replace the entire ceremony of the Day of Atonement. A scapegoat is no longer necessary, because in Christ all the people, not just the Jews, but anyone who goes to God with a repentant heart, will be cleansed of his or her sins and set free.

The good news that Hebrews brings is that in Jesus Christ, God took away the sins of the world. His death on the cross became, in essence, a perpetual Day of Atonement for those who follow him. His sacrifice has released us from our sins, purified our consciences from dead works, and and set us free to worship the living God.

[**Mark 12:28-34**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=227#gospel_reading)Our world is hung up on first place. I think here of one of my colleagues at Discipleship Ministries. Recently, our division worked together to discover our top leadership strengths using Tom Rath’s book and assessment tool, [*Strengths Finder 2.0.*](http://www.amazon.com/StrengthsFinder-2-0-Tom-Rath/dp/159562015X)The assessment revealed that one of this colleague’s top strengths was “competition.” When she shared that this was one of her strengths, she told us that she wasn't surprised. Part of her competitive spirit is nature, but part is nurture. My colleague said that when she and her siblings were growing up, their father, who was also blessed with a competitive spirit, would remind them, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, whenever they were about to enter a competition, not to forget that “Second place is the first loser!”

In a competition, there is only one winner. Like my colleague and her father, many Americans are captivated by the drive to achieve, to be the best in their field or their sport or their hobby. We all love to root for the winning player, be it in football, the Miss America Pageant, or the national spelling bee.  There can be only one number one. Second place is indeed the first loser.

Given our national obsession with being number one, perhaps it should not be surprising that in this Scripture lesson the scribe asked Jesus to name for him the number one commandment from the Lord God. Nor should it be surprising that Jesus knew the answer. Every devout Jew knew the number one commandment, because every devout Jew recited it every morning when he or she woke up and every evening when he or she went to bed. The number one commandment was called “The Shema,” which in Hebrew means, “Hear.” It was thusly named because the words to it began with “Hear, oh Israel!”

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NKJV\*).

But the surprising thing about Jesus’ answer to the scribe is that after he had named the first place winner in the commandment competition, Jesus threw in an unexpected bonus, a “second number one,” so to speak, which was, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ answer should help us competitive human beings put things into proper perspective. What Jesus would have us remember is this: Not only are human beings not the most important thing in the universe, but among human beings, no one human being is really any more important than any other human being. In the game of life, there is neither a number one nor a first loser.

Jesus was always challenging this tendency among his fellow human beings to judge people and arrange people according to their importance. Jesus once told his disciples that among the Gentiles, it was commonplace for those who had been named number one to boss everyone around. Jesus said to those who followed him, “Look, you aren’t going to act that way. And whenever one of you gets to thinking about who is number one, and wishing to be number one, then what you should do is get down on your knees and serve all the others” (*my paraphrase of Mark 10:42-44*).

Jesus tells us that it simply isn’t enough to be devout, because we so easily can turn our devotion into a competition. Who is number one in his or her devotion to God? Who around here is in first place on the road to heaven? Who among us is the best Christian?

Jesus says that along with being devoted to God, what we really need to be is loving and devoted to one another. We need to be appreciative of the gifts of others. Instead of trying to figure out how to win the game, we need instead to practice the art of holding one another in highest regard: loving one another as much as we love ourselves. How high should our regard be? It should be as high as our regard for God, who created this world and everything in it, and who is the author of life and love, and whose very nature is love.

All Saints Day is a celebration of those who have walked before us in the art of loving God and loving others. On this All Saints Day, be grateful for those men and women who have shown you how to practice the faith: how to love God above all, and your neighbors—no matter who they are, how rich or poor, how good or bad, where they live, the color of their skin, their gender, their age, their language, their religion, their sexual orientation—all the people of God’s world, as yourselves.

*\* Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*