Feast of All Saints
November 6, 2022
Church of the Good Shepherd
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A colleague of mine once served an old church that was surrounded by a huge graveyard, where members had been buried for generations. One day he was visited by the relatives of one of those buried there. They asked the priest if they could bring in a professional "medium" to communicate with their dead relative. They wanted to seek the departed's advice on some family financial matters. My colleague refused. He told them that the graveyard was part of the Church and that "we don't believe in stuff like that." The dead can't speak to us. They're dead. Right…?

Well, the Church definitely frowns on mediums and séances—they're a hoax—but it's not entirely true that we don't communicate with the dead. I mean, isn't that the point of today, the Feast of All Saints? On All Saints', we are reminded of our "ancestors in the faith" and honor the way that they not only live on in our memories, but how they are still alive among us as part of the communion of saints, that fellowship of believers that transcends space and time, life and death. As part of this eternal communion, those who have died in Christ are not lost to us but are alive in the Lord and continue to speak to us, to encourage us and to assist us in our Christian life.

Whenever we sing a hymn, read from Scripture, pray or preach, we are doing so with the saints, those faithful Christians who have gone before us. Indeed, we are dependent on them to give us the words, to tell us the stories, and to teach us the tunes whereby we praise God, grow in our faith and commitment, and find the way that leads to salvation. The Christian faith is a kind of extended conversation with the dead, a dialogue with the saints. At Winchester Cathedral in England, there is a sign on the wall that says, as you enter the church, "you are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead." To be a Christian then means that we part of a something larger than ourselves, that extends into the distant past and that continues to live on, in us, even beyond us.

Yet we live in a society that is obsessed with "the now, the new, with the next big thing." Our collective memories don't go much further than what we had for lunch yesterday. So, to submit to the past, to presume that those who have gone before us in this faith may know more than we know about living the faith today strikes many as downright odd, out of step with the rest of our culture. It's no wonder people say that the church is "old fashioned," stuck in the past, antiquated, passé. I mean, we sing songs that none of us, or even anyone we know, created, written decades, centuries ago. Our leaders dress in the fashion of a time long past. We chant from texts a thousand years old. We just read from a book written by those who have been dead for millennia. And we act as if these ancient people, people with names like Paul, David, Peter and Mary, know more about God than we do. We believe that they have something to teach us that we could not learn any other way, that the saints will teach us, if we will listen.

But, communing with the dead is not the same thing as living in the past. It's like what the Lutheran theologian Jaroslav Pelikan says about "tradition." "Tradition," he says, "is the *living* faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the *dead* faith of the living."

I saw a vivid illustration of this "traditionalism" in the current season of the show *This Old House*. Now, the show is all about restoring old houses, and so there's an obvious love for old things, but this season's project takes it to a whole new level. You see, the crew this season are working on restoring a Victorian house in Atlanta. The house was in bad repair, in fact it had been gutted. But originally it had been the focal point of the black community in South Atlanta, and was once owned by Luther Price, a civil right leader and the area's first postmaster. An admirable history. But the current owner is seemingly obsessed with "honoring Mr. Price," down to saving the rotted single-pane windows, repainting over the century of paint on the cracked clapboard siding, and taking wallpaper they discovered in the renovations and paying to have new wallpaper designed to match the old one. Not only does the owner's desire to "honor Mr. Price" entail a whole lot of extra labor and money, but also I submit that she misunderstands what it means to truly honor our ancestors. I mean, that wallpaper was probably one of several mass-produced wallpapers available in a catalog at the time and Mr. Price just chose it because it was the cheapest or because it matched the existing paint in the room. Nothing more meaningful than that. And so for the owner to be fixated on restoring the house to the way it was a hundred years ago is to make a fetish of the past. And it prevents the new owners from truly honoring Mr. Price by giving new life to the home he loved. It is to miss what is truly worth remembering and emulating.

That is not how tradition works in the church, or at least not how it's *supposed* to work. Indeed, to say that Christians live with the dead is not to say that we are stuck in the past, but that part of discipleship is a willingness to listen to the dead, to give them a privileged place in our conversation, or at the very least to allow them to have their say. G. K. Chesterton likened tradition to a temporal extension of the right to vote. "Tradition," he said, "means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about [today]" Tradition, Chesterton went on, is that willingness to listen to someone's opinion, even if he happens to be your father. Chesterton appreciated that *the saints will teach us, if we will listen.*

What then does it mean to "learn from the saints"? How do we 'listen' to the dead? One of the ways—perhaps the *chief* way—is through our worship. Now, it's abundantly obvious that our worship, the "liturgy," our formal ritualized service, is a rather peculiar thing. It is unlike most anything else you see in our world today, different even from what you see in most churches. At other churches, particularly evangelical churches, "worship" is construed as an expression of praise, our showing love and devotion to God in a creative, passionate, and public way. Hence, the identification of worship with music—for what is more expressive, creative, and emotionally engaging than music? And so when many evangelical churches speak of "worship" they're talking about the "song service" of the gathering, the performance. This is also why spontaneity and novelty is so prized in evangelical churches. If the point of worship is to show God how much we love Him, we might start to think we're not sincere, that we don't really love God, if we are just doing the same things over and over again. New ways to worship, to show our devotion, are needed to keep it "fresh" and "authentic."

I won't speak ill of that approach, but I will point out that our tradition of liturgy reflects a different sensibility. More than expression, the purpose of our liturgy is *formation*. It is less about what we do than what it does to us. Worship, we hold, is formative, formational—it

teaches, instructs, shapes us. It does so not by directly conveying religious facts or ideas, a list of things to believe, but by involving us in ritual, in actions, in repeated speech, training in us practices, habits, not just of the mind, but of the body and most of all the heart. Think of the words of the prayerbook and how they get ingrained in us—

> "by what we have done, and by what we have left undone,"
> "ourselves, our souls and bodies,"
> "wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored,"
> "sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever,"
> "my body given for you"
> "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health,"
> "acknowledge, we beseech you, "a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming."

These words of prayer spoken on Sunday morning often come bubbling up throughout the week, reminding us of the promises God has made. But not just the words; we are shaped by the whole of the service—the movements of our bodies (kneeling and processing and crossing ourselves); the changing colors of the church season, the sights and sounds and smells of the service, the sacraments and the stained glass. The image of the Good Shepherd in the window behind me—Jesus carrying a little lamb in his arms—communicates more to us about God, than any didactic description of God's attributes ever could. Taken together, the liturgy is a kind of training ground, a school, a community of preparation and practice in the ways of God.

That this is so is because our worship involves not just us, but also God. To be sure, the liturgy is composed by man, handed down over time—we can trace its origin and its changes throughout the centuries and across cultures. But it is not only of man, it is also of God. That is to say, we recognize that God is active *in* this service. God is not merely a bystander, the audience towards which we aim our performance; God is both the *audience* and *agent* of worship, enabling and directing us in our prayers. Indeed, it is through our worship, we believe, that God shapes and forms us, restores us and re-stories us, as He draws us into the story of salvation. Through the liturgy, we become participants in God's story—gathered by God's call, united to his Son in Baptism, inspired and chastened by the Word, trained to seek and to receive forgiveness, re-united with Christ at the Table, and finally sent out into the world, to bring others into the grand story. God works through this worship—through movement and posture, scent and taste, sound and symbol—to recapture our imagination, to teach us not just to know but to *inhabit* God's truth, to shape our perceptions of things, and so to train our hearts, train them to "love what God commands and to desire what God promises." The liturgy comes to us then not merely as rote prayers and empty rituals, what Pelikan calls "traditionalism," but as the form and posture by which we respond to God and through which we share more fully in God's work on earth. It is a robust example of what Pelican calls "tradition," the faith of the dead alive in us. It is like a great parade, a parade of saints, the great throng into which we have been caught up and by which we are carried along.

Now, let me be clear: Appreciating how traditional liturgical worship forms us doesn't mean there is no room for faithful innovation; it just means that what we have been given should be received gratefully as a gift. We should appreciate the wisdom it embodies. It's not so much an heirloom sitting on our mantle as it is an inheritance we are to put to use. The point isn't that we can never make any changes. If that was the case, then we'd have no organ, we'd still be

speaking Latin and candles would be the only light in our churches. As with that old house in Atlanta, honoring the past means accepting it as an inheritance, while also working to make it our own, employing the best of our skills and art, so that we can in turn gift it to others. As that sign at Winchester Cathedral reminds us, the liturgy is a conversation with God that began long before we were born and, God willing, will continue long after we're dead. We are but stewards of God's gifts, given them for a time to use them as we bring others into the story, to catch others up into the great parade, the parade of saints, the great throng into which we have ourselves been caught up and by which we are carried along in worship.

November is known as Stewardship month in many churches, when we speak of the need for Christians to be *givers*. But on this Sunday, let us remember our need first to be receivers. We are to be the sort of people who are willing to listen, to receive what the saints have to teach us, to be shaped and trained by the liturgy they've handed down, for that is where we find not only the communion of saints, but also communion with God. Thanks be to God!