



## On Mission ...

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne All Saints Sunday, November 2, 2008

**Reflection:** Today is All Saints Sunday, a day celebrated in a big way by millions of Christians around the world. Here in America, not so much. We are too worn out from celebrating Halloween, or too geared up over the election to take much notice. I suppose that's OK with us. I don't think we want to take much notice of the saints. Who were the saints anyway? You may figure they were either legendary folk from long ago who are rumored to have done big things, or lived perfect lives. Or perhaps they were those people who, as one wag said, were so heavenly minded they were no earthly good. Or then again, maybe the saints are supposed to be examples for us all of how we could be living better lives today. But what would those who lived so long ago know of our challenges today? In the end I figure most people see the saints as either irrelevant or inconvenient.

But then God sees them differently. Indeed, we're told the saints stand in God's presence even now, and they see God face to face, and God, God himself, is there to keep them safe. He is there to wipe away every tear from their eyes. Sounds to me like it's a good place to be. So who are these saints? Here's how one story in the Bible describes them:

### Multimedia/Reading from Revelation 7 (NLT)

*After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne ... They were clothed in white and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a mighty shout, "Salvation comes from our God on the throne and from the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders ... and worshiped God. Then one of the twenty-four elders asked me, "Who are these who are clothed in white? Where do they come from?" And I said to him, "Sir, you are the one who knows." Then he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb and made them white. That is why they are standing in front of the throne of God ... And he who sits on the throne will live among them and shelter them. They will never again be hungry or thirsty, and they will be fully protected from the scorching noontime heat ... He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away all their tears."*

**Reflection/Segue:** The saints were not perfect, indeed, some were said to be not very pleasant. But they gave themselves fully to God. That's why we remember them. They were ordinary people who took God up on his invitation, to come to him, to

trust in him above all else. They chose to live with God, and God, well, he has chosen them for his own. Saints are not all dead and gone. Anyone who is willing to say they are "All in" for God can have all God has to offer them in return. I have to admit, that's what I want for my life, for my kids and my wife, and folks, it's what I want for you ... that you can stand in God's presence some day and feel that joy, and know the peace, and have God, God himself, wipe away every tear from your eye forever. What do you say? Is that something that matters to you? If so, please join me as we worship God today.

### Before the world began

*Before the world began you were on his mind  
And every tear you cry is precious in his eyes  
Because of his great love he gave his only Son  
Everything was done so you would come  
Come to the Father, though your gift is small  
Broken hearts, broken lives, he will take them all  
The power of the word, the power of his blood  
Everything was done so you would come  
Nothing you can do could make him love you more  
And nothing that you've done  
Could make him close the door  
Because of his great love he gave his only Son  
Everything was done so you would come  
Come to the Father, though your gift is small  
Broken hearts, broken lives, he will take them all  
The power of the word, the power of his blood  
Everything was done so you would come*

**Intro to message:** Today I want to give you a picture of where Church of the Spirit is and where it's going. We do this about once a year, and so if you are new or visiting with us, this is a little out of the ordinary. But then, these are not ordinary times for us as a church ... or I imagine, for you as individuals. There's a lot happening, there's a lot up in the air. Your financial situation may have changed drastically in the last month. Some of you may be wondering about your jobs, your pensions, your savings, your benefits. The election has us all a bit off balance too. We'll have to wait and see if this election brings us some new version of chaos like the hanging chads four years ago. Christine has just been told she may be deployed, others of you face uncertain futures. For some of you the uncertainty is your diagnosis, for some of you it's your relationship with someone close, only it's not all that close or joyful as you thought it would be. There's plenty of uncertainty around. Who needs more?

I don't ... some certainty. But then it's not like there are a lot of choices in this ... except the choice of how you will face the future:

*I cannot tell the future, not a minute from right now  
I'm not sure of all the reasons the past happened or just how  
But there's one thing I can cling to, a hope I know for sure  
That forever you [God] are faithful, and forever you are true*

**Back to the message:** How you choose to face the challenges of this world says a lot about you. How you choose to find balance in the world, how you find joy and peace, that says a lot about your God. Because there's not a lot of other places I can imagine where you will find the same peace, or security, or joy than in putting your trust in God. In fact I can't think of one other person, or thing, that will not let you down in the end ... whereas God has promised even in the moment of your death, to lift you up and give you life without end.

So are these times worse than others? Are these times harder or more troublesome? I don't think so. Whatever mess you are in at the moment always looks like the worst one ever. Yet even through it all, through all the challenges over the centuries, God

has promised to walk beside you if you trust in him. What matters most to him is if you trust God to lead you. Some of the saints trusted in God so much they even went to their death rather than give up their faith, no matter what. Yes, they were willing to die for Jesus.

**How many of you are willing to die for Jesus?  
Or, if you are not willing to die for Jesus today, would you at least be willing to live for Jesus?  
That's the choice the saints made.**

I wonder. How many of you are willing to die for Jesus? I'm not suggesting you go looking for martyrdom. There was a famous man who later in his life was a great Christian teacher named Origen. Back as a teenager, in the first years of the church, he was so taken by the faith of the Christians who were killed by the Romans he wanted to go join them and become a martyr. The day he had made up his mind to do it, he was unable to get through with it. According to the story of this "saint," his mother hid all his clothes and he was too ashamed to go get arrested naked. True story ... and the truth is I'm not asking you to go sacrifice yourself today. Just this ... if you are not willing to die for Jesus today, would you at least be willing to live for Jesus? That's the choice the saints made. They chose to live for and with Jesus. And Jesus went with them throughout their lives, and lived through them. That's what I'm asking you today. That's the big challenge. Are you willing to live for Jesus? Or is being a Christian just a hobby for you? Because if you want to be a Christ Follower it will take a decision to go all in for God. Only in that way can you hope to get all God has for you in return.

Jesus put it this way:

### **Matthew 12:46-50** (NLT)

*Once as Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers were outside, wanting to talk with him. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, and they want to speak to you." Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "These are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!"*

Whoever does the will of my father ... that's the part where you make a choice. You have to choose to follow Jesus. It doesn't happen just by accident. We are told in one of my favorite verses, *It is the Father's great pleasure to give you the kingdom.* [Luke 12:32] It's his pleasure to give it to you, before you earn it. But you still have to take delivery. God gives you his blessings, but you need to open the door up and accept it. God will guide your life, but you have to be willing to trust him and follow his lead. So, are you willing to live for Jesus? But note the benefit to this choice. Jesus says when you make that choice you become one of his brothers, one of his sisters. There's a lot to be gained from going all in with God. You are allowed to join the family of God in a new way, a real way. And there are all kinds of spiritual gifts or benefits we might call them today, that come from opening the door up to God and letting him in. Those are gifts I can describe, but I can not give you myself. They only come when you are ready to choose to follow God. Make that choice and then God starts to change you, from the inside out, by the power of his Spirit at work in you. As one of my other favorite promises in the Bible puts it: *God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.* [Ephesians 3:20 The Message]

Now from the first days here at Church of the Spirit, that has been our one big goal. The mission statement printed out there on the wall of the Foyer hasn't changed since 1997 when I moved to Kingstowne. Church of the Spirit was always going to be about changed lives. That's the whole point of the church. Not every church, I know ... I came here from a big established church in Massachusetts. I had served churches in Norfolk, Massachusetts, Maine, and New York. In some of those churches I had a larger staff, I had a secretary and a guy who did the cleaning, unlike here where I get to do a lot of typing and cleaning every week. In one church I even had a housekeeper who called me at noon each day on the church intercom to ask if it was a good time to serve my lunch. I have served in important roles in other places, as a Dean, as a Leader ... and none of that meant much because the churches were not really fulfilling the real mission of God. They were institutions. They had buildings and budgets and committees and complaints. When I came here it was to start something new, something without the committees and the power struggles, without worries about survival. I wanted to be in a church that worried more about other people's survival, you know, where the mission was the main thing. That's why the mission statement is up on the wall for all to see. It's a reminder of what is really important here. We exist to help the next person through that door to find and follow Jesus, and then to help the people already here to learn how to

become fruitful disciples and faithful witnesses. We say we measure success not by big buildings and budgets but one soul at a time. That's the whole reason for the church to open its doors on Sundays. I think it's the whole reason Jesus came and lived, and died, and rose again from the grave. He's in the changed lives business. Means the church needs to be too ...

Now for those of you who are new or visiting, that's the piece you can take home with you. God wants you to experience the difference his Spirit will make in your life. His Spirit gives you a new sense of life, and helps you find peace in the uncertainty of this world. That's a great thing to find.

For those of you who call Church of the Spirit home, there's more to the story. As we come up on our tenth anniversary as a church it's a good time to see where we've been and where we're going. We started on December 20, 1998 with our first service. There were 80 people here, most of them visitors from other churches. The 10,000 piece bulk mailing that was supposed to go out to the whole community was delayed and people received it the following week. At the time I thought life was over, or at least unfair. The following week we had less than 20 people here. And I can tell you some of the early services fell apart in huge fiascos, as the sound system popped loud enough to hurt, or the video clips played incorrectly, or one day when the electricity went out long enough to make everything reset, only things didn't, I went right into communion only to find the bread we were using was green around the edges and the only thing we had in the building was onion pita bread. Not exactly what Jesus used. It's amazing to me that church of the spirit is actually still open. Those of you who have lived with my failings are good sports.

December 20th was a big day though. It's the eve of the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle, you know the guy we call "*Doubting Thomas*." You have to see the great irony in starting a church for seekers and doubters on a day that celebrates one of the first seekers who found faith in Jesus. God has brought us a long way since that day. And I believe God has not brought us this far to let us fail now, not if we remain faithful to God's mission for this place.

Right now we're living in our own time of uncertainty as a church. About 18 months ago we noticed there were people moving away, out of state. About that time Pastor Frazier, who had been interning here for three years, graduated from Seminary and set out to start working in a local church. His job fell through when the other church was not willing to pay him the minimum salary and benefits. The Leadership Team and I decided to invite him to stay, 3/4 time. To make up the difference in his pay the 10 people who make up the Staff and Leadership Team kicked in \$20,000 for the last half of 2007. We hoped Frazier would continue to bring energy to the church and to help us bring in new folk. Instead, we entered 2008 without additional people or funding ... indeed in 2007 we saw 25% of our congregation move away, most out of state, a few out of the country, and not one of them asked permission from the church first. And with them went about \$100,000 a year in income. We kept Frazier on until Easter to allow him to find other employment, but in the meantime used up all our reserve funds, about \$25,000. Things

did not rebound. We took out a \$10,000 line of credit. We cut expenses, delayed maintenance, cut back hours for our part time employees, and some of them have simply stopped receiving pay for their services, a choice they took in order to help the church. We still were in the hole. So we started a Capital Fund Drive to raise between \$50,000 and \$100,000 to retire our debts, repay our reserve funds and rebuild our outreach to the community. Only \$14,000 has come in, and now, with the financial situation worsening, we're not looking any better. This week we have about \$25,000 in unpaid bills and last week we delayed my payroll in order to pay the other bills. We will probably need to do that again this month. We'll see. The Leadership Team meets this week to discuss next year's budget, which will need to include pay reductions for the senior staff, and hard choices about programs we want to keep. I will also tell you that I've asked Christine to start looking for a part time position outside of the church to carry her forward if we need to cut back her hours for a while here.

That's a growing sense of uncertainty, but not a situation that we can't grow out of. Two things need to happen at this point. The first is simple enough. We need a few major donors to step forward and help us pay the outstanding debts so we are not continually juggling late notices and loans. I am praying for \$30,000 to come in between now and the end of the year to get us squared up and back on a level basis. I know this is a bad market, it's a bad time for gifts, but I also know God will help you provide ... Those gifts will still leave the church with diminished savings, but it will get the immediate bills paid for us all. If we don't receive help, we'll still manage, but it will take much longer to get healthy.

The second thing we need is even more simple and direct. We need to stay on mission. After all, the church does not exist to meet a budget. The church is here to help people meet God, and experience the change God offers those who give him their lives. There are neat signs of that even in the midst of our financial problems. One of our members, a person you would least expect, a retired woman, is taking drum lessons so she can play in a service. She figures if someday she can sit in the band, she's sure to get her family to come to church, just to see the spectacle. That's cool. There were the three or four people who brought neighbors to the Blessing of the Munchkins service, there's a dozen or so people who help regularly to lead the Kids in the Kingdom program on Wednesdays, and this just in from our team in Central America where we sent five people to sit and hold and help severely challenged children at a nursing Hospital in rural Guatemala. The report back from them is "*they are thrilled to death*" to be serving. One of them, a nurse here in the states, is setting things up to be licensed for her next trip back to Guatemala next year. Yes, in these stories, or in the testimonies of ordinary people here who have felt God's extraordinary love change their hearts, we have a lot to be thankful for. In the last ten years we have baptized many, many people, buried a few, married a few, and served the community together.

Only, somewhere along the way we have lost our first love, our first excitement and enthusiasm. I want to remind you of something I used to say all the time when we first got started. It's a phrase made famous in the 1940's by another priest, and

adopted by none other than AA. It's been my guiding vision here:

***As a church, we exist precisely for the people  
who are not yet members.***

The music we choose, the form of services, the fact I don't often wear a priest collar or vestments, all these choices are part of being welcoming to people who are not comfortable with churchy things. Because in the end it's not church we want people to choose, it's Jesus. So anything that gets in the way of someone coming through these doors for the first time and finding a place here to experience God is not helpful. So too, would be the idea that at some point in our life as a church we need to stop focussing on the people outside and start worrying more about meeting the needs (or playing the music or preaching the messages or whatever) that only people inside the doors already like. Not going to happen. It's not that I don't care about the people who have been here a long time ... but our focus, our mission, is on bringing others to Christ, to help them find and follow Jesus. I'm glad to help you discover better ways to be fruitful disciples and faithful witnesses, but those too, lead you back to bringing more people who don't know about God into a relationship with him.

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While it's easy to worry about meeting our budget, I'm more interested in people meeting our God. And from experience, from those days when we had 40 people a week in church, I can tell you, as long as we are fulfilling our mission, God will help us fulfill our financial responsibilities.

I was thinking about this, this week as I went door to door in Cameron Station. It's called farming. We go from door to door to leave invitations to our church. I don't knock on doors or try to convert people on the spot. I just leave brochures. We've asked you all to help in this, but so far this year we've only had a few volunteers. So I take some time each week to walk through a local neighborhood, and I pray about the people who live in the houses I visit. It was at one of those houses I heard a question. There I was walking up the 15 stairs to the door of the townhouse, and because my joints were bad that day, I was using my cane ... I heard the question, "*Why are you doing this? Are you trying to earn your salvation by hard work, going door to door?*" No. I answered, "*It's not my salvation that I'm worried about. I'm walking up and down these stairs for your salvation. I'm doing this for you.*"

Folks, the people who live around you or work with you, they each matter to God every bit as much as you do. And when they

are lost, God weeps for them. God yearns to have them hear that Jesus is real, that he makes a difference in life, because you can tell them he has made a difference in your life. I don't want to get to the end of the story and realize there are people who were lost, and who stayed lost, because I did not have the courage or the strength to reach out to them. I don't want to have that regret, that I could have saved a life and didn't because, because someone didn't really matter to me? What's that say about what I think about God? No, there are too many people who matter too much to God not to do something to help them find life, real life ...

### ***Insert clip here from Schindler's List***

I don't want to look back and say, "*I could have done more. I should have done more.*" I'm afraid though that I will. But I won't look back and see that I played at church, that I followed Jesus as a hobby, but that I gave my life for what really mattered. We can do more. Every empty chair here reminds us we could save one more. The greatest success you can have in this world, is to find God, and having found your way into Heaven, through the pearly gates, as you stand near God you will hear him say what he has said to the saints before you, "*Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.*" And turning around you will see a face or two or three, there will be faces in the crowd there you recognize, maybe some you don't, and each of them will walk up and shake your hand and tell you with tears in their eyes how happy they are that they found God too, and it was because of something you said, it was because of the way you served them, or showed them the example of your faith. Then you will know real success. This is the mission we have here. Yet, this real mission starts when you choose to live for God, to follow God, when you choose to share what you have found in God's presence with those who are not here yet. Come, join me in living this mission, and give your life into God's hands.

### **The Potter's Hand**

*Beautiful Lord, wonderful Savior  
I know for sure all my days are held in your hand  
Crafted to your perfect plan  
You gently call me into your presence,  
Guiding me by your Holy Spirit  
Teach me dear Lord to live all of my life through your eyes  
I'm captured by your holy calling  
Set me apart, I know you're drawing me to yourself,  
Lead me Lord, I pray  
Take me, mould me, use me, fill me,  
I give my life to the potter's hand  
Call me, guide me, lead me, walk beside me,  
I give my life to the potter's hand*