

Dr. Paul Tellström
“All Saints’ Day”

Irvine United Congregational Church
November 4, 2007

The Apocrypha *Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 44:1-10, 13-14*
Gospel Reading *Matthew 5:1-12*

word count: 1,956

Writing in Jerusalem, Yeshua Ben Sira created a guide to ethical living, in which he stressed characteristic wisdom teachings: prudent speech, wealth and poverty, honesty, diligence, choice of friends, sin and death, retribution, and wisdom itself. Although honored by Jewish and Christian traditions, the book called Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Yeshua Ben Sira, or merely Sirach is not in our canons.¹

However, near the end of his work, Yeshua Ben Sira wrote a hymn, meant to be sung congregationally. His “Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors” contains the famous opening words, “Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations.” His words are appropriate to the day, and are spoken in our churches when we remember those women and men we love who are no longer with us.

This is the Sunday that we celebrate All Saints Day, and I am going to tell you a story by Debbie McLellan² that illustrates how a strain of decency is passed on from generation to generation. The story is somewhat sentimental, so forgive me, but I think I can get away with it on this day. She writes:

“My grandmother was a small Scottish woman with a heart of gold. The quickest way to get my grandmother mad, was not to tend your chores, but we all had seen and been the recipients of her Scottish temper so you can be guaranteed our chores were always done.

“My grandparents were the kindest people I know. They never turned their backs on a family member or a friend in need. They never hesitated to offer a helping hand to a stranger.

“I spent many hours helping my Grandmother do the cooking, washing, cleaning the house and I remember that everything she did was done with great love. I always felt loved and wanted by my Grandparents. My Grandmother used to call my Grandfather ‘Dad’.

“My Grandmother and I were preparing supper one day and she said, ‘You know, out of all the grandchildren we have, there isn’t one named after me. My Grandfather had a grandson, a great grandson, a nephew and a godson named after him so he was content the name Thomas would continue in the family.’

“Over the next few days I thought many times about this and I could see in my Grandmother’s eyes how much she would like to have a grandchild with her name.

“Later that day while helping in the kitchen, I said, ‘Grandma could I name my first baby girl after you?’ She didn’t say anything at first and I thought, well maybe she doesn’t like the idea. When she glanced up at me I could see tears in her eyes but she wouldn’t look at me directly because she didn’t want me know she was teary-eyed. Then in a very strong voice she said, ‘Debbie, it would please me very much but I want you to promise me something. You have to promise me that if you name your first little girl after me that you will spell her name with a ‘C’ and not a ‘K.’ I knew why she wanted that promise, her name was Katherine but she always got called ‘Kate’ and she never liked that name, so I made her that promise.

“Ten years later, my Grandfather died, and it was difficult watching my Grandma trying to carry her life on without him. My heart would break when sometimes she forgot he wasn’t there and called him for supper.

“The years passed, I married and had two sons. I moved to New Brunswick so I wasn’t in contact too often with my Grandmother and then one day my mom called me and said Grandma had to be put into a home as senility was setting in and she was becoming a danger to herself.

“I never thought I could have more children. I remember that year so clearly in my mind. My sons were 7 and 9 years old, and my Grandmother was placed in the home during the month of January. In March I found out I was pregnant with my third child. I couldn’t believe it. I was not supposed to be able to have anymore children. Eight months later in October, I gave birth to beautiful little girl. She was baptized Catherine Lee.

“I wanted my Grandmother to see her great grandchild but my mom said she wouldn’t recognize me, her mind was that far gone. Mom said that for the past two years she didn’t recognize any of her own children and to make the trip would be useless. In my mind, seeing my Grandmother, possibly for the last time and getting a picture of her holding her namesake was worth the trip, so away I went.

“The day we went to visit my Grandmother, my whole family was there. My brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles. My mom was right, Grandma didn’t know me, and that hurt all by itself, but it felt good seeing her.

“I walked over to her and kissed her on the cheek and whispered in her ear, ‘Grandma, I kept my promise, this is your great granddaughter, my little girl, and her name is Catherine.’

“I placed Cathy in her great grandma’s arms, in the hopes I could get a picture when all of a sudden my Grandmother started stroking Cathy’s face and she said without taking her eyes off the bundle in her arms, ‘Did you spell it with a ‘C’?’

“My heart was in my throat, she knew—she knew she was holding my baby, her grandchild and namesake. I managed to say, ‘Yes, I did.’ She continued to look at Cathy and stroke her face and then she said, ‘Look Dad, she kept her promise.’

“My grandmother hadn’t spoken to anyone in almost two years and she never spoke again. She died that spring, but she died knowing I kept my promise. None of us have ever been able to explain what happened on that special day and whenever my daughter asks to see the picture of her and Great Grandmother she also asks me to tell her the story that goes with it.”

This story is the essence of what All Saints Day is about. The day was named for those for whom there is no other official day honoring their sainthood. It is a day to recognize those persons in our lives who are gone, but who made a lasting impact on us. It is also a day to recognize the strengths and gifts that were instilled in us as a result of their presence in our lives.

The author of the story had to see her promise through, and she traveled many miles with the hope that she could bring a promise kept to a woman who no longer recognized anyone. But the legacy of that woman travels even further—a young girl grows up being a part of this story around her very name, and sees that picture of her as an infant in her great-grandmother’s arms as the fulfillment of a mother’s promise. Cathy knows who her mother is, and the role she helped her mother to play by being a part of her mother’s own love and integrity. She knows that her presence on earth brought joy to an old woman who was able to break through her fog, and in the photo, she is a living witness to the continuation of a legacy this woman wanted to leave behind.

The legacy had to be more than a name. Cathy represents so much more by carrying her great-grandmother’s name. She carries the integrity of her mother in seeing through a promise. She carries the love her great-grandparents gave so freely that would bring an infant and her family to the older Katherine at this time so shortly after her birth. She becomes the product of everything that is good and decent that can be passed down, and she has no choice but to carry it on.

Cathy, her mother, her great-grandmother—they are all saints for whom no day has been recognized by the church except for this one. The saints we honor today are the ones who paved the way. They are the great-grandmothers like Katherine who taught other generations about the importance of love, of continuity, and of keeping promises. They are the people who were closest to us who helped to shape our values, and to help us to create in ourselves a wide open space to be

so receptive to God that we are compelled to be here every week. They are the builders and framers and leaders of this church, our communities, and our world, that left a legacy to our care.

The saints we honor today are no longer with us. But the saints of tomorrow are sitting here right now. There is a little bit of Cathy in all of us—someone along the way carried each of us and gave us an understanding of love. Perhaps unwittingly, we were given a legacy from someone—family, spouse, partner or friend, by seeing how our lives touched someone else’s and made a difference. This month we are attending to the Stewardship of our church so that it continues to fulfill a role not only for us, but for the others who will be coming to our doors years from now, and for their children. You will decide in your own hearts next week how you will continue to contribute to our church’s stewardship, but that it is important for you to continue to contribute to the church and to the world is something that was infused in you by others no longer with us.

The saints of tomorrow are filled with the Spirit, giving something of themselves to each other in ways that you are not even aware of yet, until someone here grows up and tells a story of how one of you influenced them. You won’t know until someone talks about how you helped to shape their life, taught them a valuable lesson, taught them the importance of loving God in how we live in this world, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Today we honor the saints who went before us, patient and brave and true—many of whom once sat here amongst us. Of whom are you thinking? Walk with the remembrance of those people to the table today. Who were the peacemakers that inspired you to know the wisdom of seeking peace? Who were the merciful that demonstrated mercy’s gentle power? Who were the pure in heart whose goodness filled you with the knowledge that it was not only possible, but preferable to live simply and ethically? Who were persecuted for righteousness’ sake that so inspired you to fight for justice?

“Blessed are,” says Jesus, prefacing each of these saints—for their reward is great...and blessed too are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Conversely, what is it about your own life that will cause you one day to be lifted up as a saint? What are the small, seemingly insignificant things you do for others that some day, others will be remembering that you did for them. Make the opportunities for the creation of such memories grow.

Thank God for those people who have shared a piece of your life, who seem to you to have been blessed; those whom you believe are indeed set apart and made holy because they have encouraged you to live towards your higher calling. Those who do to others as they would have others do to them. Thanks be to God for all the saints who from their labor rest. **Amen.**

Sermon Resource

1. Written circa 180–175 BC. The author, Yeshua ben Sira, was a Jew who had been living in Jerusalem, who may in fact have established his school and written his work in Alexandria. His work was written in Hebrew, nevertheless, and translated into Greek by his grandson in Egypt, who added a preface.

The Greek Church Fathers called it also “The All-Virtuous Wisdom.” The Latin Church Fathers, beginning with Cyprian, termed it Ecclesiasticus because it was frequently read in churches, and was thus called liber ecclesiasticus, or “church book.” Today it is more frequently known as Ben Sira or simply Sirach.

Although it was not accepted into the Tanakh, the Jewish biblical canon, The Wisdom of Ben Sira is quoted, though infrequently, in the Talmud, and works of rabbinic literature. It is included in the Septuagint and is accepted as part of the biblical canon by Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, but not by most Protestants.

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2. Story, “Namesake” by Debbie McLellan, published online @ www.heartwarmers4u.com

Scripture for Sunday, November 5, 2006

Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 44: 1 - 10, 13 - 14

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the beginning. 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; 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; those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes— all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times.

Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise. 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. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation.

Matthew 5: 1 - 12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.