

Opening Music: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus Instrumental*, Music: Charles Crozat Converse, Arranger: Bruce Ley, 2020.

Welcome

Peace be with you, and welcome to our all saints service. November 1st is All Saints Day, a day when we remember and honour saints, both the famous and the unknown, the celebrated and the personal. And in our gathering today, we will also reflect on the saintliness within our own muddled and often what appear to be, less than saintly lives.

I am Rev. Dr. Candice Bist and along with my husband, Bruce Ley, we serve the Primrose and Trinity United churches in southern Ontario, and we serve you also, if you are listening to our podcast today. So very glad you have taken this time for reflection.

November 1st is the middle child in what is collectively called ‘Allhallowtide’ – a triduum, three days of commemoration that includes All Hallows Eve – which has been shortened in our modern English to Halloween, all Saints Day, November 1, and All Souls Day, November 2nd. So, though we tend to think of October 31st as a blitz of candy and costumes, it is actually, originally, a Christian holiday and part of our feast calendar. Feast days always begin and end on the eve, or sundown of the day, or days. Think on Christmas tide beginning as it does on Christmas Eve. Tide is simply old English for the word time.

And notice the difference in approach to time. Christmas is not a single day beginning in the morning and ending at says end when everyone collapses in exhausted. It begins as the day ends, as the rush of the day comes to a close, and then carries on for 12 full days after that. The same is true for Eastertide, Epiphany tide – they are not days, but seasons of time. They combine both celebration in the form of feast days and contemplation as time set aside for reflection. So it is with Allhallowtide, time for celebration on All Hallows Eve, but time for contemplation for All Saints Day and All Souls Day.

And there is this idea in our tradition that feast days have a sense of liminal time – which is time where the veil between the material and the spiritual is said to be thin. Thin places, in the mystic tradition, are physical places where it is thought, I am using poetic language here, that heaven reaches down to earth. But there is also such a thing as thin time, liminal time, time that occupies a place on both sides of a threshold.

I like to think that when we gather through this podcast, that we experience liminal time, when the boundaries between us are softened, when a mystical community of affection gathers – even as we are physically separate -in our homes, or travelling in our cars, or sitting quietly anywhere at all, really.

So, if you ate too much candy last night, or were revelling in some other way, lovely and good, and now we gather on all saints day to remember all those who brought us safely to this moment of breath, all those who continue to uplift us, to gather us, to care for and love us, and to see within our precious selves that we are saintly also. Not by what we do or do not. But by the very nature of being human, and thus connected, to the divine spark, the heartbeat of humanity, to source of all life and love.

I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say, English/Irish Traditional Melody, Lyrics: Candice Bist, Artists: Candice Bist, Bruce Ley

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
We shall not live apart,
You are beloved, o precious one,
Part of my life and heart,
And so it is with everyone,
Who wants to live in love,
No boundaries are that stand between,
Below and up above.

Divine the spark in everyone,
Exceptions there are none,
Though clouds may cover us with doubt,
The truth is we are one,
Our darkened thoughts, and sinfulness,
Are what keep us apart,
The illusion of our separateness,
Puts out our divine spark.

So, gather up now everyone,
Let go the lonely path,
Communion is with everyone,
With sky and trees and grass,
Take up your spot with humble love,
For all will have their place,
May compassion rich, and wisdom flow,
And above all divine grace.

Call to Worship/Opening Prayer

<https://www.prayerandpolitiks.org/nancy-h-sehested-sermons-writings/2017/10/24/all-saints.2892899> (written by Nancy Hastings Sehested, and with grateful thanks)

We begin with Nancy Hastings Sehested's simply perfect call to worship and pastoral prayer. I read a lot during the week, scouring the work of other theologians and thinkers, poets and artists, all saints to me in their devotion to simultaneously stand before the burning bush, and then from that experience, serve others. Nancy is one such saint. You can hear it in her writing, in her thought. As Nancy is American, she is much concerned about the upcoming election on November 3rd, as we may be also. I have adjusted her prayer slightly, so as to open it up past her intended American audience. But her heart is so generous, I know she will not mind.

Today we observe All Saints, a tender time for the church to remember the saints who have died, and whose lives live in us still.

As part of my own spiritual practice, I read obituaries and eulogies. And have written quite a few eulogies in my ministry.

It is a practice that reminds me that death is a part of life. It is a way to keep choosing to live fully even as I am dying certainly. It places me in the river that flows with a life in love that knows no end.

All Saints is a time to illumine the mystery of the communion of saints.

Death has its day. It ends a life but not a relationship. Our grief ebbs and flows, but grief never ends.

Neither does our communion with the saints.

Something of their essence still flows through us.

Something of their life lives in us.

Something of their courage and endurance empowers us still.

And maybe in the mystery, they carry something of us in them, still speaking to us . . . still teaching us, loving us . . . pouring hope into us.

Today you're invited to name saints. Pick up a leaf. Say their name. and place it on the table, a table where they are still missed, and yet a table in which through the mysteries of God's love everlasting they sit at the table with us.

Let us pray.....

Thank you, gracious one, for the shaping from the saints in our lives...for the foolish and the wise ones, the serious and the silly ones, the reserve and the overbearing ones, the mischievous and the obedient ones . . . lives whose presence have broadened and enriched our own.

Free us from regrets by your grace.

Strengthen us by the witness of your hope-bearing and love-embracing saints before us.

May these days make saints of all of us in perseverance in the struggles, in resistance to evil, in reliance on your Spirit.

May we continue feeding the hungry, teaching and tending the children, listening to the lonely, comforting the broken hearted, healing the sick, raising all those who are dead and disheartened in spirit.

May we be found among that countless number who still practice the politics of praise for your creation, and who have always made art of your divine deal of reconciliation.

May we be counted among that number who still lives for your great dreams for humanity again and again and again . . . bolstered by the resolve that we are stronger together when we sacrifice together for the common wealth, the common good, the common cause of justice and peace.

May you still find us with Jesus, walking unafraid, unfaltering . . . undone only by your Spirit swirling in and around us all.

May we be convinced more deeply than ever that nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from your love.

Through the Christ of love, we pray and pray and pray. Amen.

Spirituality – Wisdom from our Practicing Compassion Gathering

In the reform tradition, of which the United Church of Canada is a part, there is this concept of ‘the priesthood of all believers.’ The intent behind this phrase, which comes to us way back in the time of the Reformation, is to remind us that we each within our own selves are priests, holy ones called to learn and to teach each other. It is a move away from the hierarchy of top down instruction, where certain people had all the answers and the rest of us are there simply to do as we are told.

It is a move to a more communal, collaborative way of engaging with our spirituality. This does not discount the place for certain people to train and devote themselves to matters of the spirit.

This is now more important than ever. And some people more than others, will have natural spiritual gifts.

But it widens the circle of learning and recognizes that within all of us is wisdom. It allows us to share what we know by intuition and personal experience.

This last week we gathered via zoom to pick up where we left off studying Frank Rogers's book, *Practicing Compassion*. I wanted to share with you some of the wisdom that came from that gathering, from some of the saints in our congregations. We will be continuing these weekly gatherings for the rest of the year, and anyone is welcome to join. The link is on our website.

We often think of compassion as an emotion we experience in response to encountering a certain situation, and this may be so. But in our study, we are considering the active practicing of compassion – the how of compassion. We are considering the discipline of finding compassion when we do not feel kindly towards others, when our heart is hard and we cannot find it within ourselves to feel loving.

In this most practical teaching, there are four basic movements when confronted with a person or situation bringing us distress. Firstly, we pause to get grounded, then we pause and connect with ourselves, then we connect with the divine in the other, and then, and only then, do we discern what to do. Notice again, how time slows down, demanding reflection rather than reaction, consideration, rather than the quick response based only on what we see with our eyes.

This week we were looking at the second movement, the pausing to consider our own internal world. It calls us to look within, to see what turmoil might be distorting the lens of what we see, what we hear. In our readings, each person was drawn to a different aspect of this practice.

Ann highlighted the obstructions, the anger, resentment, hurt, history, sorrows that cloud our vision when we find ourselves unable to feel compassion. This is always the place to begin, of course, for we see through the lens of our own fears, longings, lost gifts, woundedness. Mary, always hopeful for this world, reminded us that if we are breathing, if we are still here and alive, we have the ability to sense and connect with the others pain, even if we are momentarily off centre. Jill noticed in the reading the emphasis on the child like nature, the nature that does not place categories around people, does not judge but sees with wide open delight all the possibilities that are present. Karin reflected on the very real challenges of finding compassion in situations where others are emotionally and mentally struggling, the very real, and hard work, to get to the place of loving. Darlene recognized this as well, noting that we have to practice compassion, repeatedly, over and over again, so that our hearts will naturally soften, naturally become more tender-hearted.

Frank Rogers, the author of *Practicing Compassion*, writes, ‘The cultivation of compassion is really a process of recovery – of retrieving an inherent capacity that has become either in the moment or over time, buried and obscured. We know how to care. We are wired for connection.’ And so we are.

Practicing compassion begins with grounding ourselves in the memory of being beloved, understanding our innate value. And then gently, kindly, with a benevolent viewing, looking inward, before we look outward.

First Scripture

For our first scripture reading, Bruce offers us a thoughtful, reflective interpretation of the standard hymn *O God Our Help in Ages Past*. The hymn is a musical version of Psalm 90. The lyrics are written by Isaac Watts, the prolific hymn writer from the early 18th century. Watts who wrote many of our best loved hymns was an English dissenter, or what was called back then a nonconformist protestant, one who could not in good conscience subscribe to the tenets of the Church of England – or the Anglican church as we know it. Dissenters were debarred from studying at many of the leading universities at the time. But that did not stop Watts from having a lasting influence on his faith. Dissenters, as history notes, are usually just a little ahead of the crowd in their thinking, another reminder that Christianity has a long history of reinventing itself. *O God Our Help in Ages Past* has the dubious distinction of being the last hymn that was sung at the Sunday church service on the morning the Titanic ship sank.

Psalm 90

Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Our shelter from the stormy blast
And our eternal home.

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure
Sufficient is thine arm alone
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood
All Earth received her frame
From everlasting thou' art God
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.
Time, like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all its sons away
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Oh God, our help in ages past
Our hope for years to come
Be thou' our guide while troubles last
And our eternal home

Second Scripture

Introduction to Matthew 5:1-12

When I am feeling low, or in need of comfort, I read stories I have already read many times. It is a bit of a joke in our household, really. I will say to Bruce, I'm feeling a bit low today. And he will say, well, why don't you visit Rhana, or the Far Pavilions? Rhana is a series of small stories about a fictional community of people who live in the Outer Hebrides, islands off the west coast of Scotland. The Far Pavilions is a book that takes place in India around the time of what is known as the Indian uprising of 1857, the rebellion against the East India Trading Company.

I know all the characters in these books, the arcs of their redemption, their inner thoughts, their sorrows, their delights. As I have read these books many times, reading them is like visiting old friends. When I desire comfort, they are familiar to me, I enter their stories, their world. I also have a few movies and television series that are like that. I visit them when I desire quiet company outside my immediate family, but inside my home.

So, it is that I was watching a particular episode of Game of Thrones last week. For those of you who know this expansive story, it was the final one in the series. After an endless battle for power, the remaining leaders gather to see how to find their way forward.

And in it, Tyrian Lannister asks an interesting question that made me think immediately of my own faith story. He asks, "What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? No.

Stories.

Stories unite people.

There is nothing more powerful than a good story.

Nothing can stop it.

No enemy can defeat it.

Then turning to all the other leaders, he inquires, “And who has a better story than us?”

Well, the Game of Thrones story is very rich, with numerous deep spiritualities embedded within it. But when I heard that question, I thought of my own faith of birth. Who has a better story than us?

It is a pretty compelling narrative, the story of the child in the manger, the mother turned away from the crowded inn, her courageous companion, the adoring animals, the faithful shepherds, the singing angels. And that’s just a single little vignette in the sweeping tale that starts with no less than the divine voice speaking into the void. I have read and heard this story in so many variations and it still holds me enthralled. I see its shadows in all other literature and art forms. I see its darkness, too. I see its error. Mostly I see how it has been misused to hurt and enslave and control.

But still, in the kernel of pure narrative that is our faith, there is so much comfort.

And nowhere I think, is this more evident than in the opening twelve verses of chapter five in the book of Matthew. Matthew has collected the teachings of Jesus in what is known as The Sermon on the Mount and he presents them in five sections of writing, mirroring the five books of the Hebrew Torah. Matthew sees Jesus as the new Moses. The Sermon on the mount for Matthew is the equivalent of Moses on the Mount of Sinai writing down the 10 commandments.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will not dismiss the earlier teachings of his own faith. He calls all his followers to abide by the laws of Moses. But he elevates the laws, interprets them, expands them, or perhaps, draws his followers back to their original intended meaning before traditions and customs forged them into burdens, rather than gifts.

Like the opening words to a great novel, or the theme song to a movie or television program, it is in the first word or notes a creator makes their statement of what is important. And Matthew chooses to open the Sermon on the Mount with what we call The Beatitudes, statements counter cultural to the thinking of the temple in Jesus time. And still perplexing and counter cultural today. Matthew begins, as Jesus begins, with blessing.

I want you to listen to these blessings with your big ears on.

Listen to them from this view.

Jesus is speaking to us just where we are today. Just as he addressed all those who gathered around him so long ago. And those who gathered were discouraged, dispirited, uncertain, poor, in the many ways we can be poor, afflicted in the many ways we can be afflicted, hungry in the many ways we can be hungry.

He is not delivering a message on ethics. He is not telling the members of his audience what they should be doing, or how they should behave differently. Nor is he offering some syrupy consolation for those in real struggle, though his words are profoundly pastoral.

Jesus is looking out and seeing all those who need healing and seeing their very real trouble, and understanding, as only he can understand, that they do not need to do anything in particular to gain God's favour, because just as they are, they live in God's grace.

We have this mistaken idea that we need to rid ourselves of our evil intent, our slothfulness, our depression, our addictions, our whatever we see as offensive to God. And then, when we, on our own, have cleaned ourselves up, we can stand before God.

This is the pattern Jesus intends to break.

We come to the divine presence with our evil intent, our slothfulness, our depression, our addictions, our whatever we see as offensive to God. We come simply as we are. And what is offered in return is a vision particular to each of us, open and expansive, unseen with human eyes until the horizon is revealed.

The movement is always from our story of despair where we have fixed our eyes firmly on what we think is true, to God's story of renewal, to the divine story, the larger story, the communal story.

Jesus is offering those with ears to hear and eyes to see, a vision of God's world exactly in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Listen.

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.

Reflection Continues

Note that Jesus takes his time, goes up the mountain, sits, waits for everyone to come to him that wishes to be taught. Jesus never chases anyone. He waits for those who are hungry to come to him. He grounds himself in his own person, his own wisdom, and teaches from there.....just like in our practicing compassion work.

And then Jesus looks out and offers comfort, real comfort, true comfort, in the form of vision, in the way of reimagining people's stories.

Blessed are we when we acknowledge that we are low in spirit, for from this broken place, our horizon can expand past what we can currently imagine.

Blessed are we who take the time to mourn and lament in a world that rushes on too quickly from loss, for the comforter will certainly be with us.

Blessed are we when we who are humble, and gentle in spirit, for we are then open to the generosity of this world.

Blessed are we who truly desire to live rightly, to practice compassion, for our efforts will restore and enrich us.

Blessed are we when we offer mercy for as mercy is the very heart of God, we will dwell in God's affectionate care.

Blessed are we when our hearts are pure, for without the clutter of hidden agendas and competing idolatries, we will embrace the fullness of joy.

Blessed are we when we seek peace within and without, for God cherishes this work, encourages us in this task.

Blessed are we when we are maligned, or forgotten, shunned or shut out while we are trying to bring about the kingdom of heaven in our own little world. For this is part of the work, and we are in good company, along with Jesus and so many of the saints. And that's not such a bad place to be, is it?

Jesus speaks to us all now, as he spoke to others then. And he offers us an expansive vision from exactly the place in which we are standing, without a single thing changing.

This is how we are called to see others – to see them in the richness and beauty in which they are. Not from our own turmoil, but from our own place of belovedness.

And then, and only then, do we serve. Each of us is called. Each of us is equipped. Each of us is named. Each of us is blessed.

Reflection

I have called you by your name, you are mine;
I have gifted you and ask you now to shine.
I will not abandon you;
all my promises are true.
You are gifted, called, and chosen; you are mine.

I will help you learn my name as you go;
read it written in my people, help them grow.
Pour the water in my name,
speak the word your soul can claim,
offer Jesus' body, given long ago.

I know you will need my touch as you go;
feel it pulsing in creation's ebb and flow.
Like the woman reaching out,
choosing faith in spite of doubt,
hold the hem of Jesus' robe, then let it go.

I have given you a name, it is mine;
I have given you my Spirit as a sign.
With my wonder in your soul,
make my wounded children whole;
go and tell my precious people they are mine.

Announcements/ Closing Thoughts

As, in Nancy's suggestion, I will encourage you, if you can, to go for a walk and pick up a leaf for each of the saints that you wish to remember in your life. Or write their names in a journal, draw a picture of them, reflect on a picture of them. Say thank you to them. Remember their kindnesses. It will soften your heart, and you will be blessed.

A couple of local reminders, we are helping out with the Christmas Hamper program in Shelburne by collecting shampoo for 150 baskets. You can bring them to Trinity on the first Sunday of November and December from 11 – 12, when Jamie and Ann are there collecting tithes and offerings. Or call Gail, Ann, your care leader or I to pick them up from your home. You will also see online a way to support the hampers financially.

Note there is a November newsletter on the website. Care group leaders are taking the physical ones into the community, there are lots to share, so just call if you want printed copies.

Next week is our Remembrance Day service. It is a service where we try to balance reverence and respect for those who have died or suffered through the violence of war, at the same time we imagine and work towards a world where war is understood as an undesirable option, and the practice of peace, not war, is the goal. I hope you will join us.

Stay well this week, be kind, practice compassion, especially when it is difficult. The softening of our hearts is what brings us strength.

Here is our closing prayer of gratitude, from our Irish friends at the Irish Central for whom All Saints Day is an important celebration.

We give you thanks, O God, for all the saints who ever worshiped you
Whether in brush arbors or cathedrals,
Weathered wooden churches or crumbling cement meeting houses
Where your name was lifted and adored.
We give you thanks, O God, for hands lifted in praise:
Manicured hands and hands stained with grease or soil,
Strong hands and those gnarled with age
Holy hands
Used as wave offerings across the land.
We thank you, God, for hardworking saints;
Whether hard-hatted or steel-booted,
Head ragged or aproned,
Blue-collared or three-piece-suited
They left their mark on the earth for you, for us, for our children to come.
Thank you, God, for the tremendous sacrifices made by those who have gone before us.
Bless the memories of your saints, God.
May we learn how to walk wisely from their examples of faith, dedication, worship, and love.

(<https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/blessed-all-saints-day-prayer>)

***Trust Me (This is Love)*, Robert Dean McTaggart / David Michael Tyson, altered Lyrics:
Candice Bist, Arranger: Bruce Ley, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist**

I look at this mountain
It's many heartaches wide,
And I wonder
What's on the other side?

I've got to be honest
Sometimes I doubt,
My tears are asking me
What's this got to do with love?

But, I'll tell you something
To help us through this long, dark night,

When this trouble passes over
You and I will walk away
Knowing that our love survived
Another test of faith

You and I can walk on water
The river rises, we rise above
It may not look that way right now
But you can always trust in love.

Love isn't easy
I'm torn, I confess
When a heart is uncertain
It's bound to second guess

But love won't forsake us
So dry your tears, I promise you

When this trouble passes over
You and I will walk away
Knowing that our love survived
Another test of faith
You and I can walk on water
The river rises, we rise above
It may not look that way right now
But you can always trust in love.

We're here for each other,
There's still so much more,
The day is coming
When we'll reach that peaceful shore

When this trouble passes over
You and I will walk away
Knowing that our love survived
Another test of faith
You and I can walk on water
The river rises, we rise above
It may not look that way right now
But you can always trust in love,
But you can always trust in love,
But you can always trust in love,