

Sermon
All Saints' Day
Saint Andrew's, Methuen
November 1, 2020
William Bradbury

Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

On this All Saints' Day we pray: Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the **mystical** body of your Son Christ our Lord."

This is a day even the most rational, non-mystical, among us sense that we are all together, the living and the so-called dead, one fellowship in Christ. Many of us can feel our family and mentors leaning over the balcony of the other world encouraging us to keep faith in the love of God made visible in Jesus Christ.

I want to suggest that it is precisely this **mystical sense of connection with Christ and one another that** is needed if we would be the True Church today.

For I agree with Roman Catholic theologian and Jesuit priest Karl Rahner, born in Germany in 1904, when he said: "**The Christians of the future will be mystics or they will not exist at all.**"

Rahner lived through the rise of Hitler and Nazism and watched so-called devout Roman Catholics and Lutherans give their allegiance to Aryan White nationalism, hoping it would restore their economic standing in the world and support their racial hatreds. They traded in their faith in the mystical Body of Christ for membership in a cult of success, hatred and violence.

How does this happen? It happens when we stop looking for God in our daily lives and only go to church to get our religious ticket punched.

It happens when Christians stop believing in the mystical, and only believe in the material.

But the Christian faith was birthed out of mystical experiences in the life of Jesus and his followers:

+Jesus at his baptism sees heaven open up, the Spirit descending on him, and the voice of God proclaiming him God's Beloved Son.

+The despondent disciples in the Upper Room are visited by the Risen Christ, who breathes his Spirit into them. John 20

+On Pentecost the Holy Spirit baptizes the 120 followers of the Risen Christ and then 3000 other Jews from across the known world.

+Saint Paul is knocked down and blinded by a vision of the Risen Christ that totally changes his life and mission.

These kinds of experiences, though less dramatic, were also happening to ordinary women and men in tiny churches in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. Even slaves and the poor were awakening to a state of consciousness that knew the presence, power, and promises of God on the inside of their lives.

Without their mystical experiences we would not be sitting here today.

But in the year 323 AD when Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the empire, an institutional Christianity became the norm with beliefs, rules, and rituals that, as some have said, functioned more for crowd control than for bringing people into the mystical life of the Spirit.

Think about your own experience of church growing up: were you taught to look for and exhibit signs of the presence of Christ or were you taught to follow the rules and not make noise in church?

So now in the 21st century we've arrived at the place where actress **Lily Tomlin** can ask, **"Why is it that when we talk to God we're said to be praying, but when God talks to us, we're schizophrenic?"** 237

Franciscan Richard Rohr says that a mystic "simply means one who has moved from **mere belief systems or belonging systems** to actual inner experience. All spiritual traditions at their mature levels agree that such a movement is possible, desirable, and even available to everyone."

We all desperately miss gathering together for the sacrament of the altar. Yet there is another sacrament we also miss: Evelyn Underhill, Anglican laywoman and expert on mysticism wrote last century: "God is always coming to you in the Sacrament of the Present Moment. Meet and receive [God] there with gratitude in that sacrament." Evelyn Underhill

When we are open to and take the time to receiving experiences of Spirit, we find God moving in our lives in new ways.

These mystical experiences are for all of us, otherwise why would Jesus teach us to pray, "your kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven"?

When we stop expecting and seeking God in our experience, we cannot help but hear the Beatitudes as the ravings of a fool.

I mean who in their right mind thinks the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek and merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers will have any chance against the powers of empire?

I remember that line from a song in the Broadway musical Camelot: **"it's not the earth the meek inherit, it's the dirt."**

Exactly.

From an institutional church non-mystical point of view The Beatitudes should be issued with a Warning: "Warning: The Beatitudes will make you poorer, sadder, weaker—a loser and a victim of the strong and violent who rule the world."

Unless...unless it is the mystic who sees the real world, the world shot through with the glory of God in which God's justice and love shine forth.

Our readings today are obviously written by mystics: Revelation begins with these words: "I was in the spirit on the Lord's day"—that is he was in a state of awakened consciousness—"and 7 chapters later he says, "I looked, and there was **a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands."

He sees the universal mystical body of Christ that excludes no nation, race, or people; those **who enacted the realm of God embodied in Jesus.**

The author of First John is a mystic when he writes: "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

No matter who our next president is, our purpose as disciples remains the same: to enact the Realm of God embodied in Jesus. And this can only be done by those who desire to have their consciousness opened by Christ, for it is only Christ working through us who accomplishes the purposes of God.

No one is expected to manifest all the Beatitudes:

Maybe you are mourning the state of our fractured nation, or feel poor in spirit. in need of God's help in the face of the pandemic.

Maybe you hunger for God's justice to be manifested in the cities of America.

With the **Mystical Body of Christ** let us go forward in courage and faithfulness:

For as the song tells us:

They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.