

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
November 6, 2011

All Saints' Day 2011

I really did miss you, and I am very glad to be back again to worship God together. My Sundays away were very valuable, but I missed being here at St. Stephen's with you. I was glad that I didn't feel totally out of the loop because several parishioners gave me updates on what happened in my absence. I got one e-mail that said this:

"Hope this weekend's trip was good. Scott Krejci was great this morning and we had a good group in attendance.

Sylvia made an announcement that she is so appreciative of all the love we (St. Stephen's) has shown her. She is having an open house this coming Wednesday from 5-9 to show us how well she's settled in. Terry was volunteered to get the word out, and I will pass that along to Terry along with directions to Sylvia's new house.

Sylvia also thanked us for the monetary donation she was given, and that she is giving it back to us to be used to help someone else."

As I sat at my computer, I was very touched by that. The woman who had lost every single item in her house when it burned to the ground, gave thanks for what she had been given, and then gave the money she was given back to the church, to be used to help someone else.

I had planned on preaching a stewardship sermon to the congregation today. We'd talked about that at last month's vestry meeting. And then I find that a member of the congregation has turned out to preach a stewardship sermon to me, in the way she lives her faith.

What makes Sylvia's generosity so remarkable to me, is the fact that it is so unremarkable to her. In the middle of one of the worst disasters of her life, she just gives the money back to the church so it can be used to help someone else. She doesn't do it grudgingly, she doesn't agonize over it, she just wants to do good with the money, so she simply does it.

Sylvia did not go into denial about the enormity of this disaster. She felt the full impact of it. There is a reason for the old-fashioned word "stricken," because disaster is like being struck: it hurts, it sends you reeling from the impact. Sylvia felt the loss of all her familiar and comfortable furniture, every Christmas present she'd been given by

loved ones over the years, every photograph of happy times and dear people. She felt the disorientation of reaching for the simplest of items, a spatula, a stapler, and not having them. She felt the grief of seeing that her home had simply disappeared, with nothing left but ashes.

But in the middle of the pain of that grief and loss, she thanked us for the monetary gift, and gave it back to the church so that it could be used to help someone else. It sounds like a beatitude:

Blessed are those whose houses burn down, for they will thank God.

Blessed are those who lose everything, for they will be generous.

In the beatitudes, Jesus does not deny or minimize the pain involved in loss, poverty, rejection, or mourning. In the beatitudes, Jesus tells us that there is blessedness not just in spite of the pain, there is blessedness even in the pain itself. It is a hard concept to preach about, like most of the paradoxes Jesus teaches us. But when people live the teachings of Jesus, we can see how it all makes sense.

And contrary to everything the advertising industry tries to teach us, Jesus teaches us the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Sylvia was happy to give the donation back to the church both because she wants to help someone else, and because it is a way for her to affirm that she is okay, she has enough. The grief from her losses still exists, still hurts when she thinks about it, and she knows that even in grief she is fundamentally okay. And that is something to celebrate, by inviting over the entire parish and feeding them lots of delicious things!

As we celebrate All Saints' Day, we remember that the saints often go through suffering of various kinds, but what makes them saints rather than just victims is that they find the blessedness in the pain. They find that even in loss they have enough, even in suffering they are okay. And the saints also find the joy in thanking God, in giving to others, and in celebrating!

As we celebrate All Souls Day, we remember the people we have known among our own friends and family who have died, "those we love but see no longer," as our prayer book so beautifully puts it. And we remember them not because of what they owned, but because of what they gave. Loving always involves giving of yourself. It is a joy to receive with gratitude. It is a joy to give with generosity.

Fortunately for all of us, we do not have to have our houses burn down before we can experience this. The opportunity to give exists for each of us. We don't need to lose everything to be reminded that we have enough. The opportunity to love exists for each of us. We don't have to grieve to be reminded of how much it means to love another person.

I think there is a connection between the desire to have a party for everyone in the church and the desire to give money to the church to help someone else. I think a sense of celebratory gratitude, and a sense of joyful generosity, are essentially the same thing. Blessedness is probably the word for it.

The description of heaven that Jesus gives more often than any other is, as every St. Stephen's Episcopalian knows by now, that heaven is like a party, a party with plenty of good food. A celebration has a special poignancy when it comes after a time of loss or pain or grief. Heaven might very well be like leaving our earthly home and settling into a home we haven't lived in yet. Those we love but see no longer are at that heavenly banquet now. They are talking and laughing and eating their favorite things. They are in blessedness. They are rejoicing and worshipping God. Today as we celebrate All Souls' Day, we remember them. We remember that by God's grace we will join the party ourselves someday. We'll have the opportunity to tell them, "I really did miss you, but I'm glad to be here worshipping God together." Until then, we give, we love, we give thanks, we celebrate.