

All Saints' Day
November 1, 2020
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Steven Paulikas
Matthew 5:1-12

Greetings! My name is Steven Paulikas. And I'm the rector here at All Saints' Episcopal Church in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. Your Rector, the Reverend Nancy Stroud, has invited me to preach on this All Saints' Sunday. And it is a tremendous pleasure: Nancy and Bill are dear friends of mine. And I've had the pleasure of visiting the Church of the Atonement and beautiful Westfield and being shown around. So it's a special honor.

And I want to thank you for having me on this important day, not only in the church year, but in the life of your own parish, as you discern how it is that the people of the Church of the Atonement will be supporting the ministry of the church in the year to come. It is stewardship season. And it's also the feast of All Saints'. So these two things go together quite well.

Right here at All Saints' Church, I like to say that the church down the street, St. John's, and the church the next one over, St. Luke and St. Matthew, they're, you know, they're really nice. But we have *all* the saints here! I can't make that joke with you guys, because you're just atoning all the time.

But stewardship isn't about sacrifice, it's about celebration. It's about living into the abundance that God gives to each and every one of us, and celebrating the fact that we can share of what we have for the good of the whole. And in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear what it means to be blessed.

Being blessed doesn't mean enjoying all the benefits of life or being rich and powerful, beautiful or well known or famous. Being blessed means having the opportunity to make the world a better place to make it more like the world that God wants it to be. The fact of the matter is that of all the things that church is and can be of all the reasons why you and I come to church and put our hearts into these places. Church is the place that we come to practice being saints. Church is the place that we come to, to practice our own sainthood.

You know, I haven't been a priest forever. But I have been one long enough to know that many of us resist this notion that we might in some way, shape, or form, be saints. The number of times I've had conversations with people, when they'll say, "Hey, I'm no saint," or "don't think of me as a saint." But that is such a denial of who and what it is that God created us to be. God created you to be a saint. *God created you to be a saint*. That's where the blessing of life comes- in the opportunity to step into the sainthood that God has prepared for us. And how do we learn how to be a saint? How do we know what it is to step into sainthood? Well, we learned that right here in church.

Friends, there are so many organizations and groups and institutions that are worthy of our time and support and our money. But there's nothing other than the church that will continue to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout all time. There is no other place but the church that will nurture the saints of today and of the future. Sainthood sounds like it's such a slippery thing like, what does it actually mean to be a saint? And if we hear this message that we are called to sainthood, it can sound kind of hollow like hey, I'm just a person.

Nancy Stroud can tell you that when we go to seminary and are in training for the priesthood, one of the things that we have to do is to spend a summer or sometimes a more extended time, working as hospital chaplains. I had the privilege when I was in seminary of being a hospital chaplain in the very hospital in suburban Detroit, where I was born. And during that time, those short three months when I was there, my own grandmother was admitted to the hospital and eventually passed away. It was an incredible vision into the circle of life the way that God gives and then God brings home. And along the way, God is caring for us and walking with us all the way.

One day when I was making my rounds in the hospital, I met a man who was on my list of patients, I went over and did my little "Hello, my name is Steve. I'm the chaplain here." But he just pulled the blanket over his face. And that's usually a sign that someone doesn't want to talk. I learned that much at least. I kept visiting him day after day. And over time, he started to open up. I got to know a little bit

about him about his disappointments in life, his sins and misgivings about things that he had done. And I learned that he had given up on the notion of wanting to continue to live, he was ready to give it all up. I don't know what it was about this man, but there was something I deeply loved about him. I was so grateful that he gave me the opportunity to step into his life and to get to know him a little better. I went to visit him as much as I went to satisfy my own desire to get to know him. He told me one day that his wife would be coming to visit.

And I came on that day when she was there to visit. He fell asleep. Almost as soon as I walked into the room, I thought it was a way for us to be together. But before he slept, he said, I want you to meet Stephen. He's a man of God. And literally in that moment, I turned around to figure out who it was that he was talking about. I didn't see anyone else in the room. And then I realized he was talking about me. It was such a profound moment of confusion. The only response I had was one of humility. Who am I? Who am I to be called a man of God? Who am I to be called into this ministry of healing and reconciliation, to be ministering to people on their deathbeds and being with them and their most vulnerable moments? I wasn't a priest. I was just really a kid. But it doesn't make a difference. You see, I was being called into sainthood. And listen, I'm no saint. Just kidding.

We're supposed to step into our sense of sainthood. It feels like it's a weird thing to say, right? But I think that if there weren't some inkling that we all had, that God was calling us into this vocation, that we wouldn't be so devoted to church, to the very place where we hear the liberating news of the gospel given to us by Jesus Christ, who wants us all to follow him in the path to sainthood.

These are such insane and disturbing times. I've never lived through anything like this in my entire life. And of course, I know, you're all wearing masks and being careful. I know that you've all gone to vote or if you haven't, you're going to go on Tuesday. I know that we're all working in our own lives to just get through this period of time. So we can get to the other side, whatever that is. We need stronger and better institutions in our society that will bring about the reign of God, as Jesus proclaims it in the Gospel.

But let me tell you something, this pandemic will end eventually, we won't need to wear masks anymore. And we'll all be able to be back in church. And after this election, I will guarantee you there will be another election after that. But sainthood is the thing that connects us to the eternal nature of God.

When we are practicing our sainthood, we are participating in the very thing that binds all of the saints together that great cloud of witnesses that stretches back throughout time and goes back even before Jesus to the prophets and the apostles and the martyrs.

When we enter the holy spaces of our churches, the air is thick with the saints. They are right there with us. They are praying with us, praying for us, and calling us into a new life. How do you put a price on that? How do you value something that is eternal, and of ultimate value? You don't. You simply respond the way that Jesus did to everyone he met, and in every situation that he ever encountered. You give you give yourself over to God, you give everything that you have, because you know that everything that you had came from God in the first place. sainthood isn't about crawling your way onto the top level of the pedestal or the podium, making yourself better than anyone else. No. It's about making yourself a vessel, a container of God's grace in the world. And the only way you can do that is by emptying yourself of everything that is not of God. And of making yourself a person who walks through this world, in generosity, love, and charity.

It's no mistake that our stewardship campaigns in our various churches, including my very own church, often overlap with All Saints' Day when we get to ponder our sainthood and the high calling that we all have. Because you see, we live in a money- and material-obsessed society, there's no doubt about it. And in the middle of all of that, there's really no more concrete way to demonstrate to yourself and to the rest of the world, your own commitment to giving and the abundance of God, then of giving of the treasure that has been entrusted to you. That's what stewardship means. The paycheck that I receive and the money in my retirement account, they didn't really come from me. They're just flowing like blessings.

And as part of that flow, I am in a privileged position to be able to give 10% of my income (before tax) to my church. I've been doing that since I was ordained and even before. And even though I

don't make a whole lot of money, by the standards of some people, I look back on all that giving. And I know that through my own gifts, I have been facilitating a world of good. I know that I've been building up the kingdom of God, through my own gifts.

And I know you know exactly what I'm talking about. It is a privilege to be able to give. It is a high calling. And it's not something that we do that we just put as another item in our family budget. No, it's a blessing. For me, I write a check. And I do it once a month. It's the very first check that I write in the month. And it's not something that's like a bill to me, it's a joy when I open up my checkbook, which—I don't make a whole lot of checks out, but usually just to the church and a couple other places—but when I open up my checkbook, I think about what a blessing it is that there's something in there that I have to give to something that matters so much to me. And eventually I walk away with joy, knowing that I've done something good. Knowing that I've given to contribute to the work of the saints, that I've given to support this place that is nurturing sainthood, not only in myself, but in all of the members of this community. I know that I'm fulfilling Jesus' call, in part by giving of what I have for the benefit, not just of myself, but of others. That's what stewardship is all about.

Now, again, I haven't been a priest forever. But I did have a sense before I was ordained and I had to start talking about things like this, that I would hate it—that I would hate talking about money. But it turns out I actually love it, because it's one of the most concrete and liberating parts of the ministry of the church. Because we live in such a materially-obsessed society. One of the greatest gifts that the church has, is to help people get their relationships with their money straight, to help people no longer live for their money, but to think of their money as part of God's abundance. And the most practical way that you can do that is by making a pledge to contribute to the work of the saints in the year to come, and then following through on that pledge.

Now, let me tell you something: this All Saints' feast and stewardship campaign is happening at a pretty freaky time. We know that. But it's not just a strange time for society as a whole. It's a strange time for the church. I read an article that said that up to one third of all mainline denomination Protestant churches in the United States will probably close in the next two to five years. They'll close because COVID has totally shaken up the way that we come together, and the way that churches are able to finance the needs of their operations. This isn't a vision that I'm happy with. Because when a church closes, a beacon of light also is shut down.

The only way that we can continue to nurture the saints of the present and the future is to give out of the abundance that God has placed into our stewardship, to continue to give gifts of time, talent, and yes, money, to build up the work of the church. So, my friends at the Church of the Atonement, from your friends here at All Saints' Church, I wish you a very blessed Feast of All Saints'. I wish you all the best as you continue to pursue your own vocations and to sainthood. And I wish God's blessing on your stewardship campaign, that through prayer, reflection, community and meditation, you would find it within yourselves to get your relationship with your own finances and your money right. To allow God into your relationship with the material things that you have, and be liberated so that you live for God and God alone.

This stewardship season, may you celebrate the blessings that you have. May you celebrate the goodness that exists at the Church of the Atonement. May you celebrate the abundance that has been placed into your hands, not to your glory, but to God's and God's alone. Amen.