

All Saint's Day 2017  
Matthew 5:1-12  
The Rev. Matthew Wright

“Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord...” “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints...”

Today, All Saints' Day, the Church celebrates the mystery of our interdependence—what our creeds call “the Communion of Saints,” or in the words of today's Collect, the “mystical body” in which we are all “knit together.” And the saints, of course, are simultaneously all of us and also, particularly, those great exemplars who show us our full possibility and potential. Those of us on the way of Jesus are at one and the same time his saints, and we are becoming his saints.

Our Gospel for today's feast is Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, etc.” And the word “blessed” we still apply to saints today, the great exemplary ones—“the *Blessed* Virgin Mary,” “*Blessed* James Huntington.” And we get a much better sense of what Jesus was up to with this word if we look at the Aramaic that underlies the New Testament Greek. The word for “blessed” that Jesus would have used in his own language is the Aramaic *tubwayhun*, which literally means “ripe” or “ready for the picking”—a word from the agrarian culture Jesus grew up in. And when that word is used in reference to people, it can mean mature, integrated, whole, complete.

So right there is a basic Christian teaching—that there's a trajectory in Christian life towards becoming ripened human fruit, and also the possibility to be unripe, immature. And so our growth into our own “blessed” possibility is our natural ripening process—which means that sainthood and sanctity aren't something that take us out of our humanity; they're instead the natural unfolding of a life fully and authentically lived.

And so I encourage you to go back sometime and meditate on the beatitudes as the conditions for human ripening: blessed, ripe, mature, are those who mourn—those who stay sensitive and close to the suffering of the world; ripe, full in sweetness and flavor, are the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is laying out the conditions for our ripening, for our becoming fully human beings.

Significantly, our tradition tells us that this ripening process doesn't happen in isolation, as individuals, but in communion, in interdependence. One of the more interesting Anglican thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who really got this was a man named Charles Williams. He was a member of the Inklings, the literary circle that included C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and he wrote everything from theology—his book *The Descent of the Dove* chronicles the history of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church—to “metaphysical thrillers” like *War in Heaven* and *Descent into Hell*.

The golden thread running through everything he wrote, however, is a doctrine he called “Co-inherence”—and along with it a corollary practice that he named “substituted love.” For Williams, this was another way of understanding everything from the Communion of Saints to the Trinity to the Incarnation. Co-inherence teaches that we are all interwoven, that we co-inhere in each other. This is the teaching at the heart of the Incarnation—the Divine and the human co-inhering. The Trinity, of course, is the co-inherence, the interabiding, that exists within the very life of God. And the Eucharist received is the co-inherence of Christ in us, us in Christ, and God in matter.

Williams taught that our whole life unfolds in this Great Co-inherence, beginning in the womb of our mother, with whom we intimately interabide, and continuing in baptism, when we’re incorporated into a Body that is, God willing, trying to consciously live out this co-inherence. We live this out through acts of “substituted love”—William’s interpretation of St. Paul’s teaching that we are to “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

The truth is, it’s simply the nature of things that we bear one another’s burdens, whether we like it or not. Future generations will bear the burden of climate change. Today we bear inherited burdens from a history of slavery and racism. But for Williams, a saint, a Christian, is someone who consciously bears and works to relieve the burdens of another, knowing that someone else is already carrying a burden for you. And he believed that within the Communion of Saints we bear burdens together across time and space and distance. Maybe you, in your life now, are carrying and healing a burden for your grandmother. Or maybe for someone who has yet to be born.

This is the mystery of the Communion of Saints and substituted love. And, of course, Jesus is our Great Substitution in Love—we believe that, somehow, across time, he carries our burdens, and that we, bound up in his Mystical Body, are called to do the same for one another. In this light, I want to share with you a story from Mother Virginia Brown, one of the first women ordained in the Episcopal Church and a founding member of the Rivendell Community. She writes:

*My father, a history professor, had been very ill with Parkinson’s, and toward the end he was quite confused. Yet when I visited him in the hospital, he was intent on communicating something to me, something important. He said he was working on a gift for us, and it was almost finished. He willed me to understand, I thought, that it was the gift of his life. And he told me, “I can look in a certain direction, and see children being fed.” What I understood by that was that he knew he was doing some spiritual work for others by his patient suffering, and I believe he knew I understood. (It wasn’t something I tried to tell anyone else about—not till later.)*

*[The day after he died], my friend Cathy, who had also loved my father very much, was driving along the road to Nashville. It was spring, and the median was filled with poppies so*

*gorgeous that she couldn't take her eyes off them. Suddenly, she told me, she saw my father, there among the poppies. He was sitting down, surrounded by children, and was feeding each of them in turn with a spoon. In his arms he held a baby she recognized: it was Becky, her daughter whom she had adopted in Haiti, having found her nearly dead of starvation, a six-month old baby weighing five pounds, too weak to move. Becky did live and grow up, and is now an adoptive mother herself—of six children. But Cathy saw her as that emaciated baby—but now, she was being fed, and was smiling and content. Then my father looked directly at Cathy, smiled, and said, "Here, everything is remembered, everything forgotten, and everything known in joy."*

*Across the chasm of time and death, somehow, my father's self-offering, his weakness and suffering, had helped comfort and sustain a Haitian baby on the point of death. Who would have imagined such a thing? Yet when she told me about it I remembered how he had talked about seeing children being fed, out of the corner of his eye—as though he had been obliquely aware of it, though he couldn't express it directly.*

We could easily write stories like this off as hopeful, wishful thinking. The hallucinations of a dying man and the grief-induced fantasies of a bereaved woman. But Charles Williams would say this is exactly how the Communion of Saints works—that we are constantly bearing one another's burdens, in ways visible and invisible, known and unknown, across time and space and distance. And the only difference, we might say, between us and a saint is that a saint consents to bear these burdens willingly, consciously, and joyfully.

There's great comfort in a teaching like this, because it reminds us that we are never alone in our suffering or dying, and that our burdens are always shared, even when we may not see or know it. Evelyn Underhill, another 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglican mystic who greatly influenced Williams, put it this way: "When we are confounded by sudden visions of a holiness and self-abandonment beyond our span, our share in the Communion of Saints assures us that other souls will suffer and adore for us, and make up for our deficiencies by their more abundant life. For since the life of the saints is the life of charity, they cannot keep anything for themselves alone. The Life by which they live is shared, communicated from one to another, as the sap of the Vine is given through the greater branches to the less."

And so may we all grow as branches on the one Vine, bringing forth the ripened fruit of our humanity, and, held in the Great Co-inherence of the Saints, may we bear one another's burdens consciously, willingly, and joyfully.

The last word I give to Charles Williams: "Blessed be He that He has made us members one of another and all members of Him... Blessed be He that He has quickened among [us] the unity, exchange and substitution of love which is the pattern of Himself... Blessed be He that He continually makes all things new."

And blessed be God in the saints. Amen.