

Bill Krieger  
All Saints of the Desert  
November 2, 2008; All Saints Day; Year A

## **Sermon: Matthew 5: 1-12 (All Saints)**

A couple of weeks ago I announced that I had accepted a call to serve as rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Yuma AZ. What I didn't share was that I did not get a call to St. Christopher's in Sun City.

It's just as well that this door was never opened for us. Because I had an idea for a new advertising campaign that I somehow couldn't shake. And I suspect it might have been a bit much for their congregation.

Many of you know that St. Christopher's is located at 103<sup>rd</sup> Ave. and Peoria, just west of Grand Ave. I thought a billboard on Grand north of 103<sup>rd</sup> would catch a lot of morning traffic from people commuting into Phoenix. I pictured a sign asking, "Who is St. Christopher?" with a multiple-choice response underneath. The first answer would be (a) a demoted saint. The second would be (b) a giant with the head of a dog. (An artist's rendering would be shown, full length on the right side of the billboard.). The third would read (c) the patron saint of travelers. (Appropriate viewing for commuters.) And the fourth would be (d) all of the above. At the bottom would be the St Christopher's website, location, and the ubiquitous sign, "The Episcopal Church welcomes you."

The answer to the question is, of course, all the above. If you want to learn something about St Christopher, and the legends surrounding him, take a look at the Wikipedia site. There's a great artist's rendering of the giant with the head of a dog. Would look really good as a decal on the back

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window of members' cars; a St Christopher's version of the Radiant Church and CCV logos. Just more edgy. Like I said, probably just as well I didn't get the job.

I learned something else from Wikipedia, about the church celebration of All Saints Day. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the feast of All Saints grew in prominence in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of Byzantine Emperor Leo the 6<sup>th</sup>. After the death of his wife, Leo built a church, with the intention of dedicating it to her. But the pope intervened, forbidding him to do so. So he decided to dedicate it to "All Saints," implicitly including his wife. And this is how the feast changed from a commemoration of All Martyrs to All Saints. Beautiful story. No wonder they called him Leo the Wise.

As Episcopalians we love our Saints. Just take a look at the Churchman's Ordo Kalendar that we follow. Far more often than not, at Morning Prayer and at the Wed Eucharist we observe one of the saints included in the companion volume to the BCP, Lesser Feasts and Fasts.

I think one of the reasons we love our saints is that they were not, well, always saints. A couple of years ago the Wall St. Journal had an article titled, "Saints Misbehavin." [I think this is one of the few parishes some might actually catch the word play on the song, "Aint Misbehavin."] The article was written by Thomas Craughwell, author of a book titled, Saints Behaving Badly. He tells us about Jaques Fesch, a convicted murderer guillotined by the French state in 1957. Who repented while in prison, and

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was reported to be a candidate for sainthood in the RC Church. Fesch's last words before the blade fell were, "Holy Virgin, have pity on me."

Then there was St. Callixtus of Rome, who died in 222. An embezzler, brawler, and twice convicted felon. Who repented, became a priest, then pope, and died a martyr. And not to slight the women saints, St. Pelagia was the porn queen of 5<sup>th</sup> century Antioch. Her contemporary, St. John Chrysostom, said that, "nothing was more vile than she was, when she was on the stage."

In all cases there was a dramatic turnaround, a transformation all the more powerful considering their former lives. And this takes us to our gospel lesson, which speaks of those who are poor in spirit. Somehow, though some person or circumstance, each of these saints confronted the poverty of their lives. Coming to see themselves in the light of a holy God. And were broken, contrite, and penitent. Poor in spirit, and blessed by it.

Poor in spirit. Not just the poor, as the gospel of St. Luke has it. Some actually quite rich, or having wealth within their grasp. Take St. Augustine of Hippo, who penned those famous words, "Give me chastity and continence [sexual abstinence], but not yet." Augustine's first ambition was to practice law, and to lead a secular life of wealth and physical pleasure. From the age of 16 he lived openly with a mistress, being with her for 14 years and fathering a son. But he found himself in a moral dilemma. He had been impressed with the preaching of Bp Ambrose, but had sent his

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mistress back to Africa and was waiting for his mother to arrange a proper marriage into a wealthy family.

Then one day he heard a child say, in a singsong voice, “Take and read, take and read,” Augustine picked up a Bible and turned randomly to a passage. It was Romans 13: 13-14: “. . . let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Poor in spirit, and blessed.

So it was with St. Francis of Assisi. One of his earliest biographers, Angelo, writes of his youth, “He was a spendthrift, and everything he earned went on eating and carousing with his friends. His parents often remonstrated with him because he squandered a fortune, more like a prince’s son than theirs; but they were rich and being very fond of him didn’t object for fear of antagonizing him.”

But things changed for Francis. One day he met a leper when he was riding near Assisi. Overcoming his revulsion, Francis dismounted, gave the man a coin and kissed his hand. The leper gave him the kiss of peace in return. Some days later Francis took a large sum of money to the leper hospital. Gathering all the inmates together he distributed it, kissing each of their hands. On his deathbed Francis said, “This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance.” A gift of a life of poverty, a blessing to one aware of his poverty of spirit.

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So many others turned away from lives of wealth and comfort. St. Anthony of the Desert, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day. And another, whose full story I hadn't known. Thomas Merton. I knew him from his writing on Contemplative Prayer, of his friendship with the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and of Merton's life as a Trappist monk. But I didn't know of his earlier life, while at Cambridge.

From Adrian House's biography of St. Francis: "Thomas Merton . . . was middle class, rich, vain (he flaunted a velvet cloak) and attractive; he used these assets to give good parties and seduce girls of a lower class for whom he had feelings no deeper than sexual pleasure . . . [in] 1933 one of them bore him a son, and he was relieved when his guardian paid off the mother and obliged him to return home to America. There, six years later, at the end of a wild night with his friends he suddenly thought, "I am going to be a priest."

Just to be clear, we are not all called to the priesthood in this way. As for my college carousing, you'll just have to try and pry it from Paulette. Fortunately for me, she'll have to plead the 5<sup>th</sup>.

So my carousing will be left to your imagination. But my story is akin to that of the saints, who found themselves in poverty of spirit, and then blessed. And part of that blessing was a new understanding about money.

And since we are on the subject of money, have you heard the one about the two men shipwrecked on an island. After exploring for a short time, one of

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them started screaming and yelling, “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! There’s no food, no water! We’re going to die!” The other man propped himself up against a palm tree, unconcerned. The first man shouted at him, “Don’t you understand? We’re going to die!”

The second man said, “You don’t understand. I make \$100,000 a week.” The first man looked at him like he was crazy. “What difference will that make? We have no food, no water. We’re going to die!” The second man said, “You just don’t get it. I make \$100,000 a week and I tithe. My pastor will find me!”

I have admitted before that I have had a long struggle over money. But over the course of my Christian journey, I came to understand that I needed to give more. When we returned to the faith in 1984 and attended the Church of England, we gave more than most. When we moved to CA and attended St. Timothy’s, we made a point to give more than the average pledge. Not wanting other families to subsidize our contribution to the parish, since I believed that our income was better than average. And there was another step upward in coming here to All Saints, four years ago.

I feel good about giving here because I know, for a fact, that your priest works very hard. And as St Luke says, quoting Jesus, “. . . the laborer deserves to be paid.” Luke 10: 7. But don’t look too closely, or you’ll find the payment deserved is just room and board!

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Bob Chartrand gave an excellent homily on stewardship last Saturday [Sunday]. Making the point that we don't give to balance the budget, we give to God in response to what God has given us. We give like we give to our children – out of joy, because we can, as a tangible reminder of our love for them, as something that can help them be safe, or happy, or whole.

And we give because it's part of being in the Kingdom. Where we are free from the fear of scarcity, free from seeking meaning and security in our financial assets. And when enough of us respond as we should, we will be free from a world of hunger, and disease, and the brutal suffering of poverty. Something future generations will judge as barbaric.

We know what is right. We know our fear. We know the way out. I can offer this simple testimony. Had I clung to money, I would never have become a priest. And I would have lost a precious gift, a blessing no fortune could compensate.

Our gospel is clear. Follow the saints, follow the Scriptures, follow the Cross. From our poverty of spirit will flow blessings. And we all know the way. It is simple. It is Jesus, of Nazareth.