

St. Barnabas' Church
Sermon for All Saints' Sunday
November 3 & 4, 2018
The Rev. Martha Kirkpatrick

Isaiah 25:6-9; Ps. 24; Rev. 21:1-6a; John 11:32-44

Teachers in the School of Love

Our loved ones who have died have ways of coming into our immediate consciousness unbidden. My Mom and Dad have been present to me, these days, as I am moving into a new house. If they were alive, they would have called me to see how it was all going, offering sympathy and advice. My mother's phrases would pop up into my head. As I was struggling to install something using my impact driver, I remember how Dad taught me how to choose a drill bit, as WRTI played one of my father's favorite arias from *Der Rosenkavalier*.

So, I open my Henri Nouwen book of daily meditations on October 30 and I read this opening sentence "I realize how deeply the death of a parent touches us." He has my attention. He goes on to say that the felt absence might lead to the awareness of a new presence. Nouwen recalls Jesus' words to his disciples as he shares a final meal with them: "it is for your good that I 'leave, because unless I leave my Spirit cannot come." Jesus leaving meant that he would become more intimately present to us, that he would unite himself in a new way with us." Nouwen goes on to say that this may not just be true of Jesus, but "in and through Jesus of all people who leave us. That after a time — and it does take time for the intensity of grief obscures it — our loved ones become present to us in a new way."¹

As is our custom for All Saints' day here at St. Barnabas', we invited y'all to bring in photos of the saints in your life. So who, or what, is a saint? My mother's picture one of those on the usher's table. Is she a saint? Certainly not by any definition she herself would hold to! There is THAT definition, those who are in the pantheon of revered Christians, officially sanctified by the Catholic Church, "grandfathered in" to the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, and other holy women or holy men who have been deemed by some general consensus to be exemplars of the faith.

And yet we also say, as our actions demonstrate, that "the saints" might also be understood as all those who have gone before, whom we hold in our hearts. And we find warrant for that broader understanding in several passages in the New Testament.

Navigating that conundrum — saint as a small and rather untouchable group of particularly fine people or more broadly understood -- I find help from Richard Rohr. He offers the metaphor of a school. There are those who have fully graduated. But he argues, again based on the New Testament, that the word "saint" must also apply to all of us who are kindergarten, primary school, middle school, high school, college, and doing graduate work. We are all in "the school."

The School of what? What is it we are principally here to learn? Is it Biblical literacy? Christian theology? The prayerbook? The catechism? Quite simply, the school is love. We are here to learn how to love. The saints teach us how to love by showing us love. Every saint on that back table showed someone here something about love. The only way we learn is by being loved, and loving.

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *You are the Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living*, compiled and edited by Gabrielle Earnshaw (NY: Convergent, 2017), 330.

So today we recognize those who have gone before us who have taught us about love. I ask you, who are your teachers these days? Who taught you something about love this past week? I'm going to highlight two teachers, one a person, and one an experience.

The world lost a luminary last week, on October 27, one who has transformed the faith of countless numbers of Christians by showing them the path of love. It's hard to overestimate the impact of this man, even if you have never heard of him. Fr. Thomas Keating, Trappist monk, author of numerous books, founder of the organization Contemplative Outreach, still going strong all over the world. Father Keating recognized in the Buddhist practice of meditation something that had deep Christian roots in the desert fathers and mothers and the mystics down through the ages: a method of silent prayer that allows one to rest in the presence of God. Over the years his thoughts crystallized and the practice became known as centering prayer. One of his favorite sayings was: "Silence is God's first language. Everything else is a poor translation." Centering prayer is all about heartfulness. It goes to the relationship with God, who is already there. It's not sitting in a void. If you've ever seen any of Father Thomas' videos — and there are many — you have already experienced him as a profoundly spiritual man and an inspired teacher in the love of God. He also recognized that the deep channels of love are to be found in people of other faith traditions. He began organizing gatherings with representatives of other religions, including the Dalai Lama, imams and rabbis.

Speaking of that, another lesson in love came to me Friday evening, when along with lots of other Christians I attended the Friday evening Shabbat at Congregation Beth Shalom. We were there in solidarity with the Jewish community after the hate crime that killed 11 Jewish attendees at a Shabbat the week before at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh. The place was packed; they were bringing out folding chairs. If you've ever attended a Shabbat, you know that most of the service consists of reading from the psalms, and prayers taken from the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament. There was deep sadness and mourning and prayers for healing. There was also warmth and love and welcome flowing through that room Friday night. God was in the room. Several of us visitors came away saying "we should do this more often."

If we look back on our history in the school of love, we see a path that is increasingly demanding, calling us to grow, to face our fears and prejudices, to learn a wider and deeper love. All of it prepares us to know and recognize the infinite divine love, and to discover that that Divine Love has been with us all along. We don't earn it. It's just there, and always has been. Our work is to see it, proclaim it, and live it. We are saved by love. In fact, only love will save us.

So my challenge to you is this: who have been your teachers in love this past week? And then thank God for them, bless them, and pay it forward. Amen.