Sermon for All Saints' Sunday: Matthew 5:1-12
The Rev. Brooks Cato

Happy All Saints'! With this incredible music, you incredible people, and more fun still to be had, it's a fine day to be in church. I'm heartened to see so many gathered to soak in the beauty only a place like this can provide. And I'm amazed at how perfectly this place has fit me and me, you. It's a real joy.

Now, I suspect y'all know what jazz is, but maybe All Saints' needs a little explainer. Simply put, All Saints' honors and remembers the saints of the church. It's actually the middle part of a three-day celebration delightfully known as the Triduum of Death which began yesterday on All Hallow's Eve and comes to a close with tomorrow's All Souls' Day. This three-day window reminds us that all those who came before, all of us now, and all those yet to come are tied together in place and purpose; we also remember that while death is a real and difficult thing, it doesn't get the final say. Even if you're not so sure about afterlife-y stuff, you've probably felt places that seem to carry memories without a soul inside. That's kinda the sort of thing we're about.

So, what are saints? Boy, am I glad you asked. The Episcopal Church has a funny relationship with saints. For us, they aren't some kind of intercessor or bearers of special powers. Mostly, they're regular people who provide models of what good Christians ought to do in their contexts. They didn't have to be perfect. They didn't have to be miraculous. They didn't even have to be unwaveringly faithful. They just had to be human. But sometimes it's hard to know how to live out this whole Christian thing. So, over the millenia, we've built a list of folks who got it really right at least once, sometimes big and dramatic, sometimes small and quiet. But also, because it's this weird Venn Diagram of past, present, and future, and because you don't have to be perfect to be a saint, that means we're in the club, too! That's right, you're a saint! If you read up on the lives of the saints, some of those models are lofty and unreachable, but others are as regular as yours or mine. At least one of the saints in our calendar's there just for being a dedicated teacher. I know at least a dozen of y'all fit that saintly mold already!

Now, that's all well and good, but I also find the timing of All Saints' to be rather poignant. Y'all've heard me talk about Jesus for 10 years now, and you've heard me try to tie those ancient scriptures to real life's challenges. But with the world the way it is, maybe it's getting harder to give credence to a single voice calling out in the wilderness. Maybe we need those models especially now when so many claim to speak for Christ while stepping on those he'd save.

Later this week, our nation'll gather to cast votes. There's so much fear and anxiety and worry and anger and despair going into this election -- rightly so -- and it's getting ever harder to see how I can love the same neighbor whose boot's firmly planted on my other neighbor's neck. I know, it's hard. But "love your neighbor" doesn't come with caveats. The interwoven humanity of All Saints' means we're just as tied to the people in camps as the ones putting 'em in there, and that's damn hard. But also, "love your neighbor" doesn't mean blindly supporting all they do. Sometimes "love your neighbor" means telling them they're doing wrong, especially when the wrong they're doing involves bullying, beating, and killing. The prayer we said a little while ago says we "follow the saints in all virtuous and godly living," not we "follow the saints in all their vile and vicious deeds." If you're interested in one of those far-from-perfect models, Saint Augustine had a lot to say about that.

Actually, the lives of the saints -- their stories -- I think they should accompany us to the polls. Not because we need a Christian nation or whatever, but because there's great goodness in their model and great goodness should be at the heart of all we do, including governance. So, I figured on this All Saints' Sunday, it might be useful to remember what some of those saints stood for. Anskar was a stout proponent of healthcare

for all who needed it. Junia was an apostle imprisoned for their beliefs and also happened to be nonbinary. Alcuin advocated for the inclusion of people of other faiths. Lancelot Andrewes and Thomas Aquinas encouraged gentle care of the environment. Anna Ellison Butler Alexander, Roland Allen, and the no-relation Richard Allen pushed for racial equity and inclusion. Aidan, Antony of Egypt, and Charles Freer Andrews prioritized the poor and condemned the excesses of the wealthy. Gladys Aylward and Ambrose of Milan staunchly opposed the catastrophes of violence and war, the latter famously refusing even the emperor entry into a church, saying, "You may not come in. There is blood on your hands." Priscilla, Agnes, Cecilia, and Agatha of Sicily showed that women's place in church was in the pulpit, at the altar, or in the pew, whichever they wanted. We've got saints from England, Italy, Spain, France, India, China, and The Philippines. And in case you're wondering how this priest justifies talking about politics, this priest might just direct you to the model of Saints Alban, Alphege, Anselm of Canterbury, William Wilberforce, George Whitefield, and Francis Asbury. For what it's worth, that roughly two-dozen-saint battery I just went through accounts for only 5% of the saints in our calendar. We could go through 'em all, if you like, but something tells me y'all'd rather get on to the casseroles next door.

But maybe, as you go to the polls, maybe you don't care that much about the saints, which is fine. Scripture's pretty important, too. We can do that. The only place abortion appears in scripture is in the directions for performing one; that's in Numbers. Exorbitant wealth's condemned repeatedly, most notably as the single most frequent topic Jesus talks about. Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers all say that there shouldn't be any different laws targeting immigrants. Women lead the People of God in Judges, Luke, Romans, Philippians, and First Corinthians. Philemon demands fair treatment across socioeconomic status. Gender minorities are heroic characters in Esther, Acts, Jeremiah, and even Genesis. Sewing discord's condemned in Exodus, Proverbs, Titus, and Matthew. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Second Peter denounce corruption. First Samuel, First Chronicles, Hosea, Nahum, and James promote peace in place of war. Genesis sews the seeds for the creation and thriving of Islam. Genesis also commands environmental responsibility. The Bible explicitly forbids pedophilia in Leviticus, prioritizes the poor in all four Gospels, and challenges heads of government all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

But maybe you don't care that much about what scripture says. I mean, it was written a long time ago. So, what does the Church say today? Women belong in the highest halls of power, as embodied by Sarah Mullaly, the Archbishop of Canterbury. There are more trans priests in The Episcopal Church than there are trans athletes in the NCAA. The Bishop of Washington regularly preaches on mercy and compassion for immigrants, regardless of immigration status. Our governing body, General Convention, opposes overly restrictive voter ID requirements. The Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem laments the US and Israeli attacks on Iran and Palestine. 154 Episcopal bishops call for the suspension of ICE and justice for those killed, detained, or deported. And while lamenting the burden of discriminatory and deadly tactics violating the humanity of the most vulnerable, our Presiding Bishop stubbornly proclaims that "death and despair do not have the last word."

The great ordeals persist, and still the interconnected Children of God gather from every tribe, language, people, and nation to make known to the world what "Christian" means. I can't tell you how to vote, but I can tell you what The Episcopal Church believes. And it's not the Church's fault, by the way, where those beliefs happen to fall on the political spectrum in any given year. I can't and shouldn't tell you how to mark your ballot, but I can remind you what Jesus said. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the merciful. Remember that. Remember the church, remember scripture, remember the saints, and vote. For death and despair do not have the last word.