

ALL SAINTS DAY

November 1, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

I'm really struggling.

This probably doesn't come as much of a surprise to many of you, especially if you've been listening carefully to my sermons over the past year. You've probably heard a bit of John the Baptist coming out of me from time to time. I've sometimes felt like a lone voice, crying out in the wilderness. This probably isn't a unique feeling among new pastors, but it's a new feeling for me.

My struggle is this: It seems that much of what I know to be true and right and Godly, and what I preach and teach about in this congregation, is constantly being undermined by the forces of society and culture around us. And so it was in the midst of my inner turmoil that I was preparing for this week's message to you.

You come to church each Sunday to hear the Gospel and words of comfort. We pastors need to be preached to, too. So we read each other's work, in the hope of having the Good News proclaimed to our own hurting souls. The words of Pastor Henry Brinton, Senior Pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, especially spoke to me, so much so that I would like to share them with you. This

sermon of his, based on today's Gospel reading from John, is entitled "The Sainthood Diet."

+ + +

Life is often brutal and short in the Third World. But the people of Micronesia, in the western Pacific Ocean, are now dropping dead in their fifties – and not for reasons commonly associated with the developing world. There is no famine here and little evidence of the diseases that cut life short in places such as Africa. The big killer, according to the *The Atlantic Monthly*, is what some epidemiologists are calling "New World Syndrome" – a group of maladies brought on not by viruses or microbes or parasites, but by the assault of rapid Westernization on traditional cultures. Micronesians are just now beginning to face the diseases that knock us off here in the United States: diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. They are facing these problems because they have been introduced to our fatty, sweet, and salty foods: Spam and corned beef and Vienna sausages, cake and muffin mixes, soda and beer and candy bars and potato chips. Go into a Micronesian grocery store, and you can find plenty of unhealthy imported food, but you can't buy fresh bananas, papayas, breadfruit, coconut, or mangoes.

Welcome to the promised land of diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Of course, our New World problems are not purely physical – our spiritual

diet is bad for us as well, and it is hurting us at younger ages all the time. We're victims of our own brand of New World Syndrome, getting sick from all the junk that we ingest in our rapid-fire, multitasking, individualistic, consumer-oriented culture. Evidence: church membership is declining, and a shrinking number of people are being nourished by the fruits of traditional religious culture. At the same time, a hunger for personal spirituality – cut off from religious institutions – has been soaring. Americans are feeling spiritually dead, like Lazarus in the tomb, and they are searching for life in online chat rooms, in exotic religions, and in the self-help sections of shopping mall bookstores.

What's missing is a spiritual lifestyle that will create a church of saints – people who are healthy and holy servants of Jesus Christ. In his Sermon on the Mount¹ Jesus offers a “Sainthood Diet” that is not too salty, sweet, or fatty, but provides us with the spiritual nourishment we need for abundant life, now and forever. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” says Jesus, and happy are those who are merciful, pure in heart, and working for peace² – these are the elements of a spiritual diet that will lead to a life of health and wholeness as children of God. If you are feeling sick from your own strain of New World Syndrome, follow the Sainthood Diet's instructions to “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”³

This spiritual approach is as countercultural as a meal plan that substitutes carrot sticks for potato chips, and it has equally healthy results.

To grasp the full significance of this Sainthood Diet, take a careful look at the story of the raising of Lazarus,⁴ and gain a deeper understanding of how Jesus confronts – and then conquers – the powers of sickness and death. For starters, it is clear that Jesus is not untouched or unmoved by physical and spiritual destruction. He takes fatal illness seriously, and personally. Going to the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus, Jesus encounters the sisters Martha and Mary, and when Jesus sees Mary weeping, he is greatly disturbed in spirit and is deeply moved. He begins to weep himself, prompting some onlookers to say, “See how he loved him!”⁵ What a powerful image this is: God’s own Son, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, so overcome by grief over the loss of his friend and by anger over the destructive power of death, that he breaks down in tears.

Illness and death are not minor annoyances for Jesus. They affect him so profoundly that he is overwhelmed by emotion and cries. And just as he weeps over Lazarus, he weeps over physical deaths in Micronesia and spiritual deaths in our country. But then, suddenly, another group of onlookers in the story speaks up and makes a less sympathetic observation: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept Lazarus from dying?”⁶ It’s a question that a great many people

ask every day, in a variety of forms. Why doesn't the universe-creating God create miraculous cures for little children with cancer? Why doesn't the death-conquering Christ beat the heart disease of our elderly church members? Why doesn't the infinitely powerful Spirit of God eliminate the pain of the suffering poor? Just why do innocent people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why doesn't God protect us from violence and illness and death?

Within the church, we know that answers come only when we seek nourishment from God's Word together. In John 11, Jesus puts one key ingredient – belief – at the heart of the Sainthood Diet when he says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”⁷ This is not a guarantee of a straightforward physical healing, but instead it is a promise of new life based on belief. Rather than promising Martha a miracle, he invites her to trust him to work for new life. There's a big difference between these two. Instead of saying, “I'm going to step in and make everything okay,” Jesus says, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” He promises that the dead will rise, but he doesn't predict exactly how. So what does Martha do in response to this invitation? She says yes. She believes. She proclaims, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”⁸

The very same invitation is extended to us today. Jesus says to us, in the midst of our physical and spiritual illnesses: “I am the resurrection and the life... Do you believe this?”⁹ Do you believe that I am working for radical new life? Do you believe that I am the Resurrection, the One who conquers death? Do you believe that I am leading you, right now, in so many unexpected ways, from dying to rising? “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”¹⁰ It’s impossible to predict what form this new life will take. But we can believe it will come.

When we face physical or spiritual death, there is only one approach that can improve our health: the Sainthood Diet. It comes from following the teachings of Jesus, from “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God”¹¹ to “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”¹² Most of all, it involves believing in Jesus, and trusting him to be at work for unexpected new life in every time, place, and situation. That’s a lifestyle choice that will create a church of saints, a body made up of healthy and holy servants of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

<1,455 words>

¹ Matthew 5 and Luke 6

² Matthew 5:6-9

³ Luke 6:27-28

⁴ John 11:32-44

-
- ⁵ John 11:36
 - ⁶ John 11:37
 - ⁷ John 11:25
 - ⁸ John 11:27
 - ⁹ John 11:25-26
 - ¹⁰ John 11:40
 - ¹¹ Matthew 5:3
 - ¹² Luke 6:36