

On the surface, it's simply a matter of timing. But in reality the problem goes much deeper. At the center of the controversy is a Federal Agency that everyone loves to hate: the Postal Service. "After years of cost-cutting... the U.S. Postal Service is [now] contending with angry customers whose mail is taking longer — sometimes much longer — to arrive." That's the problem on the surface. It's simply a matter of timing. But the reality goes much deeper. Because "New research by Congress... [shows] the post office's tracking system ... is so unreliable that there's no way to [even] know how late the mail really is."<sup>1</sup>

On the surface, it's simply a matter of timing. But in reality, the problem goes much deeper. In reality, it's about budgets & staffing; infrastructure & technology. It's about having good information to even know what in the world is going on. And it's the reality of those deeper problems that cause people to lose *faith* in their reliability. It's the reality of those deeper problems that cause people to lose *hope* that the future of mail delivery will look any better. It's the reality of those deeper problems that cause people to lose *charity* - or love - and support efforts for change. On the surface, it's simply matter of timing. But in reality, the problem goes much deeper. In reality, there's a crisis of faith, hope & love.

Today at church, the Feast of All Saints, can sometimes feel the same way. The Feast of All Saints is about celebrating the lives of all God's people through all

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/federal-eye/wp/2015/10/05/the-mail-could-be-taking-even-longer-to-be-delivered-than-the-postal-service-is-saying/>

ages, including our own. It's about the work of Christ & the witness of Christ through all ages, commemorating a vast cloud of witnesses among the faithful living and among the faithful dead. According to one theologian, "The chief benefit of commemorating the saints is the recognition through them of [Jesus himself], who never leaves us without a witness."<sup>2</sup>

That's what today is about on the surface. And the problem for some people is this: if the Feast of All Saints is about celebrating God's work, then why is God taking so long to deliver? For Christians it's been 2,000 years since the resurrection of Jesus & the victory won by Jesus for all the faithful living & the dead. So why is God taking so long to deliver and to put everything right? That's the problem on the surface. But the reality goes even deeper. In reality, the problem of All Saints is about long-term human suffering. It's about enduring human tragedy & despair. It's about wondering whether we even have the right information to know what God is up to and (literally) what in the world is going on.

And it's the reality of those deeper problems that cause some people to lose *faith* in God's reliability. It's the reality of those deeper problems that cause some people to lose *hope* that the future will look any better. It's the reality of those deeper problems that cause people to lose *charity* - or love - to support any efforts for change. On the surface, it's simply matter of timing - why so long? - but in reality, there's a crisis of faith, hope & love. Today, the Feast of All Saints is our

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<sup>2</sup> White, J. F. *Introduction to Christian Worship*.

invitation to address the deeper crisis.

The key just what I've been talking about. The key is faith, hope & love. They're known as the theological virtues. For Christians they're also gifts. They're never something we achieve on our own. "They are theological because they are formed in us by the grace of God."<sup>3</sup> And these virtues - faith, hope & love - allow us to participate in God's life & activity.<sup>4</sup> It's one of the reasons St. Paul talks about them so much. He loves talking about faith, hope & love. He does it so much they're enshrined in memorials like our stained glass window here at church. The next time you read one of Paul's letters in the New Testament (which I know you do all the time...); the next time you read one of Paul's Letters, have a little fun and play a word game to see how often Paul inserts these theological virtues of faith, hope, & love.

He usually does it at the beginning of a letter, right up front. He writes things like, "We heard about your *faith* in Christ Jesus and the *love* that you have for all the saints, because of the *hope* reserved for you in heaven," (Col. 1:4-5). Faith, hope, & love. He introduces them at the beginning and then keeps reworking those themes all the way through. Because for Paul the entire Christian life is grounded in the divine gifts of faith, hope, and love. They belong together and if any of Paul's churches get off track in Christian life, he reminds them to keep them all

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson, J. R. (2011). Virtue(s). In J. B. Green (Ed.), Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics (p. 813).

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd Ed.)

together. For instance, the Thessalonians; they get off track because they're suffering. So Paul says, "don't grieve as others who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, so, through Jesus, God will bring with him all those who have died," (1Thess. 4:13-14). The Corinthians have a problem with love. The Galatians are in a real mess about their faith. So Paul writes letters that emphasize the unity of all three virtues together: faith, hope & love. For any of the difficulties or differences at church, then or now, we can usually trace it back to some deficiency or imbalance in faith, hope, or love.

Today, our invitation at the Feast of All Saints is to gather in worship and allow God to rebalance any of our deficiencies with faith, hope or love. Our first reading from the Wisdom of Solomon points the way. Because Solomon gives a grand vision of Christian *faith*. That might sound strange because the Wisdom of Solomon isn't even part of the New Testament or the Old Testament. It's one of those readings we call the Apocrypha - the Jr. Varsity of Christian Scripture. But this reading gets it right. Because it reveals unflinching faith in God; trusting God to care for anything or anyone that we've lost and see no more.

It's a marvelous picture of Christian faith. And he uses the beautiful language often heard at funerals in The Episcopal Church. He says, "the souls of the righteous are [right now] in the hand of God and no torment will ever touch them," (Wis. 3:1; cf. Phil. 1.23). It's a beautiful image. But it requires eyes of faith that reach beyond the surface; that reach beyond what Solomon describes as "the

eyes of the foolish” (3:2), where foolish here means something like “eyes that only look on the surface.” Most people look at tragedy or death and they only see loss - “they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction,” (3:2). But no, says Solomon - “they are at peace” (3:3), “their hope is full of immortality” (3:4). And at the very end of the passage he shows his full hand when he says, only “those who trust in [God] will understand,” (3:9). In other words, we need faith. We need faith to trust God with our greatest hopes and also our deepest wounds.

That’s faith. But how do we get there if trusting God right now feels so far away? That’s where our second reading comes in. Because our second reading from the Apocalypse, or Revelation, to St. John; is all about the theological virtue of *hope*. The vision we hear today at the end of Revelation is the answer to a famous prayer Jesus taught his disciples: *thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven* (Mt. 6). The Lord’s Prayer and the Revelation of St. John are two great places to look for Christian hope. And if we do, we learn that it’s about God’s arrival here on earth.

*I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for a husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more... for the first things have passed*

away.” (Rev 21:2–4)

According to one pastor, “The [real] surprise in St. John’s [vision] of heaven is that it comes in the form of a city.”<sup>5</sup> In John’s vision, heaven isn’t simply a return to the Garden of Eden. It’s not simply about “getting away” from all the busyness of life. That’s not heaven. It’s about rescue, consolation, transformation. In fact, this city-shaped vision suggests that heaven itself is quarried out of the marble and granite<sup>6</sup> of all our pain & suffering, all of our tragedy & despair. But “Now, descending out of heaven we see the city as a community in adoration, ready to receive God’s love.”<sup>7</sup>

Christian hope is the theological virtue by which we come to know & believe that “everything in history is retrievable.”<sup>8</sup> Nothing is lost for the God who says, “I am making all things new,” (Rev. 21.5).

Christian faith & hope together offer a resolution for our deepest trouble, pain or sorrow. But these theological virtues of faith & hope really only make sense if our lives have already been formed by Christian *love*. Christian love is the “virtue by which we love God above all things”<sup>9</sup> simply because God is God. We don’t do it to get anything. Christian love isn’t manipulative or self-serving. We

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism*.

simply love God, who is God. And it turns out, this love becomes a key to unlock the door for hope & faith. Love of God becomes the wellspring for faith & hope. Because for Christians that love takes on flesh & blood in the person of Jesus. We don't have to explain Jesus, defend Jesus, or protect Jesus. We're simply invited to love him, because Jesus is life itself. And our love of Jesus becomes a source of his life *in us*.

Look at the Gospel. When Mary & Martha come to Jesus in today's Gospel they're in the depth of pain & despair - they have a real problem. On the surface, you might say, it's simply a matter of timing. Because several days ago they told Jesus that Lazarus was sick - but instead of coming to heal the man, Jesus waited. In fact, he waited so long that Lazarus is already dead. That's the problem on the surface of today's Gospel, but of course, in reality it goes much deeper. In reality their problem with Jesus is about friendship and betrayal, it's about family & trust, it's about having information to even begin understanding what kind of person would allow that to happen. *What in the world is going on, Jesus?* That's their question.

“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (Jn. 11. 37). In other words, why did he take so long to deliver? For all intents & purposes, the situation in today's Gospel is hopeless, bereft. Now that Lazarus is dead, faith & hope are gone. The only thing present is wounded love. The wounded love of Mary & Martha. The wounded love of Jesus himself. And to

everyone's amazement, when Jesus shows up, that love becomes a wellspring of faith and hope - even in the midst of death.

That's the story we hear in the Gospel. And it's how we're invited to address any crisis in our own lives. Today, the Feast of All Saints is an invitation to acknowledge any crisis or trouble, any pain or suffering, any tragedy or despair. It's an invitation to bring all that; to bring our loved ones - and especially ourselves - into this Gospel story of hopelessness, despair, and wounded love. It's an invitation in the midst of brokenness to have our eyes opened in *faith* (and to see Jesus weeping for us). It's an invitation to have our ears opened to the *hope* (that Jesus loves us too!). And finally, it's an invitation to rest in the loving arms of Jesus himself, patiently waiting for our own resurrection, when Jesus cries out to death for all of us, the same way he does for Lazarus, and says, "Unbind them and let them go." *Amen.*