

CHANGE

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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The Sunday after All Saints Day; Year A

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Two weeks ago I received a message from Canon Hunt. The dinner for the Uptown Interfaith Service Center, our primary outreach ministry to the homeless in San Diego, was planned for that night. The featured speaker, Counsel-person Toni Atkins, feared she might not be able to make it because she was locked in hearings regarding a living-wage for city workers. The question was urgently put: would I be willing to stand in as a substitute?

The answer, of course, was yes – I completely support the ministry of Uptown and I'm with Toni in the work she had to do that day. In the end, she made it to the dinner – the Council voted to uphold the living-wage standard - so the \$50 a plate guests got to hear two keynote addresses (oh, happy day!).

I began my talk that night by reflecting on the inner life of a woman from southern Ohio, a home health-care worker – two jobs, no day off, no benefits, no health insurance, barely making it. She spoke about the presidential campaign that we all, I'm guessing, are praying will end on Tuesday. Both candidates in the race for the White House go on about change but change, she said, rarely works for her. When things change in her world they tend to get worse. She's hanging on by her fingertips and she's disinclined to listen to people who promise better days; she's heard it before and it hasn't made any difference.

This woman's story has stayed with me for two reasons. First, I'm an optimist. I really do believe we can get it right. I believe people can hold onto to hope and be rewarded. Jesus today blesses the downtrodden – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, those persecuted for the sake of righteousness. They will be comforted and filled. They will be called children of God. They are given the Kingdom and promised the earth. That blessing is not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die. That blessing is a here-and-now promise and a future pledge; the Kingdom is beyond our imagining and closer to us than we are to ourselves.

So I'm haunted by this woman's hard-won sense of hopelessness in contrast to the witness of Jesus. I'm also haunted by her belief that change is always negative or harmful. The truth is, change simply is. It happens. Everything is impermanent. All created things evolve, decline, reemerge, mutate, recreate. Change is inevitable. It may work in our favor at times and it may work against us at other times - but it will occur. It is pressed upon us. Every human being will, at some point, come face-to-face with the issue of impermanence. And

here's why, here it is in stark detail: our bodies change - we age and we die. And that brings us to the meaning of this day.

Today is the Sunday after All Saints Day. We're offering a requiem mass for those who passed away in the previous year. We remember them by name in our prayers. We also, in silence, pray for all dear departed – those who left us recently and those who left decades ago. We honor our dead and we remind ourselves that someday we will be similarly honored.

As we offer this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, we recall an important line from the funeral liturgy. As the priest consecrates the bread and wine, God's people are prayerfully called back to Jesus Christ our Lord: who rose victorious from the dead, and who comforts us with the blessed hope of everlasting life. For to God's faithful people, life is changed, not ended; and when our mortal body lies in death, there is prepared for us a dwelling place eternal in the heavens.

Did you get that? For to God's faithful people, life is changed, not ended. I love saying that line and I believe it with all my being. Now, can I describe that change for you in detail? No, I can't. Do I know what it looks like? No, I don't. I can point you to today's first lesson, the vision from the Book of Revelation, but I'm not at all persuaded that this portion of scripture provides an accurate glimpse into the afterlife. It intends to give hope to a persecuted and beleaguered people; it does not intend to paint a word-picture of the heavenly realm. So we don't know what heaven will be like – we believe that our lives will be changed, not ended, but we have to wait trustingly before we discover the precise nature of that change. That pause could last days or decades.

So what do we do in the meantime? We might return to that dear, tired woman in southern Ohio. We might let her stand before us now as a representative figure - an icon of our common vocation, if you will. We might work together to prove to her that change in this life does not always lead to more suffering, more fatigue, more despair. As we do so, we will reveal ourselves as resurrection people, saturated in love and addicted to hope.

It's not enough to simply profess that. I believe we best honor the memory of our dead as we serve the living, as resurrection hope springs to life in word and deed, in mercy and justice. So will that be our legacy? Days or decades from now, will they say of us that we not only gained heaven but also brought a small piece of heaven to earth?