

Golden Rule 3.0

We think that it was sometime near the end of the 1st century AD, during the rule of the Roman emperor Domitian, that a prominent pastor and theologian of the early Christian church named John was shipped and banished to the tiny Greek island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea—most likely on account of his religious and political views—and we think that there, perhaps in a cave on the island, these inspired words that we just heard this morning were penned as part of a highly imaginative pastoral letter that John writes to seven churches in the area. Although the interpretations of this letter vary quite widely and wildly, the basic intent seems to be as a letter of encouragement—encouraging the early church to remain faithful and to remain a bit defiant even as a sort of alternative or counter-cultural community within the Roman empire, even and perhaps especially in the face of suffering and persecution.

Knowing a bit of this context, I think—imagining that inspired writer of long ago banished to a desolate island, holed up as a sort of prisoner in a cave, himself facing a bleak future, even as he keeps in his mind’s eye the churches which he knows and loves and which also, in their own ways, face trying times—knowing this can help set the tone for what we’ve heard here in these beautiful words, words that we tend to hear during funerals and memorial services, or that we tend to hear today, on All Saints Day...

Words that share John’s vision of the great multitude, a cloud of witnesses from every culture and language, a group that’s too many even to count, representing all those who have made it through life’s trials and travails, making it through what John calls “the great ordeal,” all those, in other words, who once knew all that we can know about life and its challenges—about what it’s like to be sick or in pain, or to be plagued by anxiety and doubt, or to love and to risk losing what one loves, and we hear about this group that has made it through “the great ordeal,” we hear about them how:

*For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and they worship God day and night...*

And God will shelter them....

And they will hunger no more, and thirst no more;

*the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;*

But they will be lead to the springs of the water of life,

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

We don't happen to know what time of year John had this vision, but the church calendar leads us to imagine that it might have been sometime around now, sometime around the beginning of November, so sometime after harvest and before winter—a time that cultures around the world have come to mark and to celebrate particularly as a sort of thin time in the turning of the year— a time when the liminal boundaries between heaven and earth, and between the past and the present tend to loosen and dissolve—a time when we might, as with All Saints Day, find our thoughts turning back in remembrance of all those loved ones who have come before us, and who have shaped our path by the path that they themselves once walked.

And so in Mexico, for example, we can think this morning about the wonderfully colorful and celebratory “day of the dead” or *día de los muertos*, a tradition which blends a 3,000 year old Aztec ancestor celebration with a more recent Christian All Saints celebration into an occasion meant not to mourn or to grieve, but to honor the deceased and to welcome in a festive, party-like atmosphere the temporary return of their spirits. And so they build elaborate altars that welcome the spirits of the departed, laying on these altars various offerings to the dead—candles, incense, fresh fruits and breads, pictures, and other artifacts that the dead enjoyed while they were alive. Perhaps most vividly, blazing orange marigolds are laid everywhere sort of like orange safety cones on the road to guide the spirits back to this extravagant party held in their honor. And on those special occasions when the stars align, *día de los muertos* also coincides with the time of year when the monarch butterflies make their return to their Mexican wintering grounds, and so the legend has it that these butterflies are the very souls of the deceased ones returning to earth.

Meanwhile in the Philippines, All Saints Day, or *Undas* as it's called there, finds the Filipino peoples congregating in large crowds in cemeteries, where they gather around their family plot, setting up flowers and picnic spreads, while the children run and climb around the cemetery playing games. As night comes, thousands of candles and lanterns light up the cemetery, and hymns rise up in the glowing dark as these families sing and pray together before setting up their tents for the night, turning the cemeteries into large campgrounds, where they prepare to keep vigil and then to sleep overnight next to their loved ones, loved ones both living and dead.

Learning a bit about these and other All Saints celebrations around the world, I found myself wondering this week, why the All Saints celebrations tend not to be as robust in our own North American cultural context—why, for example, in the Philippines they spend the night with candles camping out next to their departed, whereas we tend to mark this time of year most emphatically the night before and without much direct or reverential reference to death but instead with candy, pumpkins, and children in costumes.

There's something I think, that's quite beautiful and worth considering and learning from here, particularly as it relates towards our own culture's attitudes towards death and dying, as from a robust All Saints celebration like *Undas* or *Dia de los muertos*, one of the things we can find ourselves reminded of is the simple recognition that death is a natural part of the human experience—that death is an essential part of the continuum that includes birth, and childhood, and growing up to become a member of a family and of a community—a community that, as All Saints reminds us, not even death can separate us from.

A community that not even death can separate us from. That strikes me today as a wonderful way to think about what we're up to here as the church and as the body of Christ—that we're called to be the type of community that not even death can separate us from.

Changing gears a bit here, I want to share this morning another thought about what the church can be like at its best. In my own experience of the church, both growing up and now as a pastor, I've come to see that some of the most important and memorable and critical moments are those when we experience what I think of as the circle or the scope of our moral concern or of our moral imagination expanding — *“draw the circle wide,”* as one hymn puts it, *“draw it wider still.”*

One such moment for me was a Christmas Eve service when I was in middle school, so about the mid-90s. The church I grew up in is on the larger end for churches in our denomination of the United Church of Christ, over 1,000 members something like that, and it's located in what's demographically a pretty affluent and conservative small town in Ohio. What I'll never forget is that on Christmas Eve of that year, when the church was most packed both with members and non-members, the then-pastor of the church used the occasion to boldly preach to what was then the most taboo and the most controversial issue in the town—the issue of gay relationships and of gay marriage—and as he told the story of how beautiful and sacred love is, no matter who it visits and binds together, about how it would amount to something like blasphemy to deny this gift from God, I felt my own heart opening, and I felt the hearts of all those there that sacred night opening, *“draw the circle wide; draw it wider still.”*

There have been other moments along the way, and recently there was one such moment for me here in Vermont at the Grace Church in Rutland. Jim Antal from the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ was speaking to the issue of the ecological call of our times, and he presented an idea that he called the Golden Rule 2.0. The duty, as Jesus puts it, to love our neighbors is at the very heart of our faith, he reminded us, but what if we need to expand our concept of who counts as our neighbor? And so he challenged us that day, saying with our new understanding of how the world is interconnected, our neighbors are not just those whom we're living with today, but our neighbors are also in fact all those yet to come, all the future generations who will inherit the earth as we leave it to them. And so the Golden Rule 2.0—to love all the

neighbors, those alive today and those generations yet to come. Again, I felt my heart opening, *“draw the circle wide; draw it wider still.”*

Today, on this All Saints Day, I’d like to propose an addendum to this idea and to present as sort of food for thought this morning, an idea that we can call the Golden Rule 3.0. The idea being that the duty to love our neighbors is indeed at the very heart of our faith, and this means not only the duty to love our present neighbors, and not only the duty to love also those neighbors yet to come, but also to love as best as we are able all those neighbors who have gone before us, all those beloved ones who have shaped our path by the path they themselves once walked, those departed neighbors in this community of faith that not even death can separate us from.

And so for all the saints today—present, future, and past—may we *“draw the circle wide; draw it wider still.”* Amen.