



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

ARE WE GOOD ANCESTORS?

November 2, 2014

Matthew 5.1-14

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he sat down with his disciples, saying:*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*

*You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.*

Bhagavad-Gita 12.13-14

*The one who lets go of hatred,  
who treats all beings with kindness  
and compassion, who is always serene,  
unmoved by pain or pleasure,  
free of the "I" and "Mine,"  
self-controlled, firm and patient,  
whose whole mind is focused on me—  
this is the one I love best.*

(translated by Stephen Mitchell)

In Charles Dickens's book *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a conversation is had between a young girl and an old schoolmaster in a cemetery where the girl comments on the untended, forgotten graves.

*'I rather grieve,' said the child, bursting into tears, 'that those who die about us are so soon forgotten.'*

*'And do you think,' said the schoolmaster, 'that an unvisited grave, a withered tree, a faded flower or two, are tokens of forgetfulness or cold neglect? Do you think there are no deeds, far away from here, in which these dead may be best remembered? ... There may be people busy in the world, at this instant, in whose good actions and good thoughts these very graves—neglected as they look to us—are the chief instruments.'*

*'There is nothing, no, nothing innocent or good that dies, and is forgotten. There is not an angel added to the Host of Heaven but does its blessed work on earth in those that loved it here. Forgotten! oh, if the good deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would even death appear; for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves!'*

Each year we come together on this first Sunday of November, on the heels of All Hallows Eve, Halloween, to remember those who have gone before us. It is a day of communion, not only with God and one another, but with those who have gone before us. Each year we read names and remember with great affection the impact those people have had on our lives and on the life of this church.

We don't have to think very hard to remember that those who now rest in their place among the soils of the earth are the origin of many of our gifts, whether it be a trait we have inherited from a grandfather, or a learned behavior from a grandmother which has made all the difference in our well-being. We only have to recall that special teacher, that friend, that mentor whose diligent and undying belief in us was the catalyst for our success, if not always in achieving, then in learning how to cope with failures. In some cases, we may have learned what not to do, but that, too, should be honored, for we have learned about the consequences of bad choices.

These we remember as saints, as "salt of the earth," as "a light in the world." We have known them as peacemakers who are blessed by God and those who, by the nature of their being, are merciful, who let go of hatred, who have treated all beings with kindness and compassion, who are free of "I" and "mine." We don't always realize these gifts when they are living among us because the duties of daily life cloud our insight. But when they are gone from us, we are most keenly aware of all that was good about them.

The list of saints in our necrology of the past ten years, listed in our bulletin today, and those beyond this list for the past 156 years, are the pillars upon which this church was built. They persevered over their time here, sacrificing, contributing, each generation passing on to the next the commission and the wherewithal to keep this caring church for thinking people a vital congregation. This is what we celebrate on this All Saint's Day, this day of communing with saints past and present. It is also a day of committing ourselves to the future. We are beneficiaries of their legacy to carry it forward.

The mantle rests on us. We are the saints for future generations looking back, saying thanks for keeping the ministry of this church thriving and vital. We have been given a wonderful gift of this church, honed on the anvil of commitment from those who are now gone but whose spirit lives on in this place.

As we have heard from the stories of families in our church, many of us are here because we didn't fit in churches that espouse exclusion, or churches that reprimanded us for thinking outside the theological box, or churches that stifled our potential for enjoying life by a heavy-handed theology that threatened and scared and otherwise espoused a judging, vengeful God. We have come here because it is a place where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled; where those who are peacemakers find like-minded souls; where the merciful find mercy and the poor in spirit experience the kingdom of heaven.

Future generations count on us to provide the same generous, liberal, inclusive family that models a God of unconditional love and a verve for life in all of its abundance without a dividing line between sacred and secular, serving a God who is the God of all. This is the day we commit to the future what we have inherited from the past.

The story is told of a young lad inquiring about the stained-glass figures on the cathedral windows, wondering why all of them had the first name of "saint." His daddy explained as best he could when finally the boy said, "Oh, now I get it. Saints are the people that the light shines through."

Many a person through whom the light shone for us is now at their rest, but as Dickens so poignantly states that many a good deed and many a good life can be traced to their source to those whose bodies who are now one with the earth, that mother who firmly guided her child in strong values of love and honesty or that father who courageously stood by his child through a difficult time.

A steward is a caretaker, a manager, an investor of what has been given to us; it is a human task not just a church gig. Stewardship is about being the best parent or grandparents we can be; being the best teacher or mechanic or firefighter or garbage collector so that from our grave will emanate the values for even the 7<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> generation after us, though they may never encounter our name. Stewardship is about being a good neighbor, a humble friend, a courageous model of what it means to be a person of integrity in the face of life's challenges. Good stewards are saints who let the light of hope and peace, of joy and good will, shine through.

Today is a great day of celebration and communion with the living and the dead, a day of honoring the privilege that is ours to carry it forward and all in the luxury of having gotten an extra hour of sleep last night to boot.

When the going gets tough and the world seems like its going to hell in a hand basket, will we throw up our hands in despair, or will we model for our children and their children what it means to live faithfully in our hope of God's presence, giving thanks for the past that as nurtured us and committing to being valued ancestors for those who come after us. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann