



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Smoltification, Baptism and the Communion of Saints

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 1, 2015

All Saints' Day—Based on John 11: 32-44

Standing by a series of concrete fish ladders in Vancouver a number of years ago, I learned a new word, connected to an unusual reality: "Smoltification."

The marine biologist near the ladder told a group of touring parishioners and me that smoltification describes the life changes and stages of a young river salmon.

It seems that after several months of solitary contentment as a "bottom-dweller" and as a "jealous patroller and protectionist" of its modest domain, the fish takes a sudden interest in the larger world—the Pacific Ocean!

Scientists are just beginning to understand smoltification, a complex matrix of physiological changes that occupy a salmon from birth, to going downstream, to its emersion into the larger world of the ocean.

During the process the young salmon becomes more streamlined, the texture and color of its scales are transformed, and its gills adjust to allow for greater tolerance of diversity. In short, the young salmon is transformed for its intended life in the larger ocean.

Well, as you can imagine, as a priest and as a preacher, I was writing profuse notes as this biologist described this very intriguing pattern of change. In so many ways, he was describing the intention in Christian Baptism... when a person is given transformative grace, enabling a shift from being merely a "bottom-dweller," protecting one's small domain, to the taking on of a new nature so as to live with a broadening, Christ-like perspective in a larger more diverse world. And we declare in the waters of baptism that this transformation will take people to places they/we didn't expect to go. This grace will give us wider dimensions of expressing God's love, it will bring us relationships and circumstances that will challenge our preconceived ideas and opinions. This grace will give us views and vision enabling greater participation in God's larger ocean ... world.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, and as part of our observance we remember the faithful departed and we "gather at the river," which is our font for baptism—today, three adults at 9 a.m. and six children at 11 a.m.

"Wade in the Water" we might sing, wade into the waters of smoltification, transformation, into the communion of saints.

During our prayers at the font, we welcome them into the community of souls with the following words: "We receive you into the household of God, confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

In short, Christ called—and calls—a vast array of humanity to be the household of God—sinners, Pharisees, tax collectors, harlots, priests, women, men, children, gay, straight, black, white and brown, musicians, athletes, scientists, homemakers, and, yes, attorneys. God gathers all into the "communion of saints."

In this family—into this community:

- + The boundaries widen;
- + Identification and values are shaped by Christ;

- + We all take on a new name with each other: sister and brother;
- + Our family crest becomes a cross and an empty tomb;
- + Our property, time, emotions, energy and skill-sets take on a new perspective;
- + Love of neighbor becomes the highest ethic for living.

The Gospel test from Matthew—a portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—speaks clearly of these values: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger for more of God, those who are merciful, those who have a pure heart, those who are peacemakers, those who are persecuted."

In all these ways and more we are invited to join the communion of saints and be hopeful lights in our generation. And we have some wonderful models to go by.

There was a shining light revealed years ago in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Fred Craddock, who was a professor in a theological seminary, was on vacation with his wife. And it was one of those times when they really wanted to be together; they wanted to spend time with each other. They were in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, that sort of clip joint set down in the mountains—you know what it's like, you've been there, all those stores and all those things that in some way detract from the beauty of the mountains. They were in a restaurant, and they were eating lunch together. An old man came into the restaurant. He had on overalls, old grungy boots. He stopped at the table and he looked at Fred Craddock and he said, "Hi, what's your name? Fred said, "My name is Fred, Fred Craddock." The man said, "What do you do?" Fred didn't want to talk to this man so he thought he'd take care of it pretty quickly so he said, "I'm a homiletics professor in a theology seminary," and the old man said. "Oh, a preacher." And pulling up a chair, he sat down and he said, "Do you mind if I join you?" "No, join us." "I want to tell you a preacher's story." He pointed out the window and he said, "Do you see those mountains out there? I was born in these hills and I love them, but when I was born, I was what they called an illegitimate child. I didn't know who my father was, and I became known as Ben, the bastard boy.

"Everybody in town knew me as 'Ben, the bastard boy.' When I was in school they never let me forget it. When the other kids would go to recess, I would stay by myself in the room because I didn't want to be confronted with that. When I walked down the street, I had the strange sense that everybody looking at me was saying, 'He doesn't know who his father is.' Then one day when I was about 13, a preacher came to town, and I heard that he was a good preacher, and I went to hear him. I went late and I left early, and he was good, oh, he was good. I went back several times — always arriving late and leaving early so I wouldn't have to meet anybody and be reminded that I was Ben, the bastard boy. Then one day the sermon was so good I forgot to leave. The final hymn was over and I tried to get into the aisles but they were filled with people. All of a sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I heard the words, 'Son, what's your name?' And I looked up into the eyes of that big, tall preacher man. And when he asked me what my name was, it hurt. And then he said, 'Who is your father?' It was like somebody cut me with a knife and twisted it. And then he said to me, 'Boy, I know who your father is. I could tell by the family resemblance.' "And the old man said, "It hurt me even more because I wondered — did he really know who my father was?" And then the preacher man said to the little boy, "Boy, your parent is God, and don't you ever forget it." The old man was moved by this story, tears filled up in his eyes and he got up to leave, and as he left, he turned to Fred Craddock and said, "You know, those words changed my life," and then he went out. The waitress came running up to the table, and she said to him, "Do you know who that was? Do you know who you were taking to?" And Fred said, "Well, I think his name was Ben." She said, "That was Ben Hooper, the Governor of the State of Tennessee." Ben Hooper was Governor of the State of Tennessee from 1911 to 1915, and the words of a preacher telling him that he was a son of God, that he shouldn't forget it, changed his life.

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