

Tracy Daub
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Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17

CELEBRATING OUR ORIENTATION

Maybe you have heard the expression, “History is written by the victors.” The expression implies that it is the winners who get to shape the stories, the narrative, of the events from their perspective and define what and who are important. Who cares or even remembers the perspective of the losers? It’s the winners get to write the stories that will be remembered.

Like the Roman Empire. The Romans got to rule the world because they had the power and the strongest military, and the money needed to conquer lots of other nations—including the land where Jesus lived. So the Roman story of domination was the primary story that people lived in and under.

And that is still often the case today. There are still governments and leaders and organizations and companies whose power enables them shape the stories we have to live in and under. These stories often consist of domination and the belief that might makes right. The idea being: because we have the power, we can do whatever we like. That kind of story. These stories told by the victors in our society often consist of unkindness and revenge, of hypocrisy and suspicion, of privilege and greed. The empires of might and domination teach us that these are the stories that determine our society.

But then along comes Jesus. And Jesus tells us a radically different story. In the face of this dominating force of the Roman Empire, Jesus tells a story about the meek and the merciful, about the peacemakers and the grieving, about those who yearn for justice and those who suffer for their faithfulness, about those who live humbly and those rare individuals who remain

immune from cynicism and distrust. In the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elevates very different values than those embraced by the Empire and declares there is far more powerful story.

And he didn't just tell this story, he lived it out. He spent time with those considered outcasts, he gave second chances to those who had done wrong, he included the lowest members of society, he fed the hungry poor and healed those shunned because of illness. When people failed him, as even his beloved disciples would do, he did not reject or turn his back on them. Instead, he included them in his circle of love, giving them yet more chances to join him in telling a story of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. Jesus' very life tells a radically different story than the one we often see played out in the evening news, or in our halls of power, or the corporate board rooms, or even in our own neighborhoods.

Today on All Saints Sunday, we remember those who have passed from this earthly life who chose to orient their lives around the story of Jesus. We give thanks for the ways they taught us this story, lived out this story, and modeled this story in their lives. None of them did it perfectly. We recognize that all of us are some combination of saint and sinner. But we are grateful for their *orientation* and for how this has helped lead us in orienting our lives around the story of Jesus.

To orient one's life around the story of Jesus is not a trivial matter. To orient one's life around the story of Jesus is not merely about coming to church, or teaching Sunday school, or being friendly. To truly orient one's life around the story of Jesus takes courage and commitment.

In a vision given to the evangelist John in the passage we read from Revelation, a great assembly of the saints stands before the throne of God, all robed in white. And they receive

great honor before God's throne as those who "have come out of the great ordeal." These faithful individuals paid some kind of a heavy price, most likely martyrdom, for having oriented their lives around the story of Jesus.

We today might not face martyrdom, but life gives all of plenty of ordeals in which we are tried and tested as to which story we will embrace in our lives. Ordeals are times that test us and reveal what we are made of. And right now, all of us are living through a great ordeal. As political, social, economic, and public health issues converge into one massive ordeal, we face a time of testing. What will be our orientation? Will we orient around fear? Will we orient around suspicion? Will we orient around revenge? Will we orient around scarcity? Will we orient around might makes right?

The saints we remember today and all those who went before them helped show us a different orientation for our lives: the story of Jesus. In the course of their lives, these saints we remember knew their own great ordeals—whether those were personal ordeals or communal ordeals. And yet still, the saints of the faith pointed the way to Jesus and his story, to a higher reality than the reality we find in the world's empires. This higher reality tells a story of great beauty and meaning and yes, also the story of power—the power of love.

Today we celebrate our orientation. And we celebrate those who taught us about this orientation. Whatever our sexual orientation, what matters most is that we orient around the story of love and mutuality. Whatever our political orientation, what matters is that we are oriented around the story of justice and compassion. Whatever our social orientation, what matters most is that we are oriented around the story of service to others and care for the least among us.

This is our time of testing. This is our great ordeal—or at least one among many we will face in our lives. In this time, this moment that you and I are alive, we are those saints who get to tell a different story--the story of Jesus.