

Sunday, November 2, 2014, All Saints A
All Saints Lutheran Church, Port Orange, FL
Delivered by Rev James Graeser, Assist. To Bishop

HANDKERCHIEFS DROPPED

Think back with me to an earlier, simpler time. Maybe to the days of Victorian England. Maybe to the days of Chivalry and the Middle Ages. A woman sees a potentially suitable man. She needs to get his attention—she needs to get him to notice him. So what does she do? She drops her lace handkerchief near him as she passes by, hoping that he'll pick it up and have reason to come talk with her.

Lace, frills and ribbons have long been associated with the concept of romance, originating from the days of chivalry when a knight rode into battle sporting a ribbon or scarf presented to him by his "fair lady." Lace has been used throughout history in the making of women's handkerchiefs. In centuries gone by, if a lady dropped her handkerchief, a man might retrieve it for her, and it was not unusual for a lady to intentionally drop her handkerchief into the path of an attractive man in order to encourage his attention. The literal definition of the word "lace" is to "snare." Stay with the image for a few moments of those simpler times when a dropped hanky was all it took.

Today is All Saints' Sunday. Traditionally, it is a day to think back and remember those saints who have died in the faith before us—not just the famous ones like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Nicholas but also the saints more personal to us who have passed into the next life, maybe our parents who brought us to church, maybe a grandparent who helped us find God's fingerprints in creation, maybe a Sunday school teacher who helped us memorize the Ten Commandments. And, All Saints' Day is a time to remember those saints among us who have yet to die. Saints are living people, too. People who still impact us and help show us something about God and his kingdom. You may be sitting next to one right now. The reality is that all of us are saints. The Apostle Paul says we are saints and sinners at the same time—we can one minute help others catch a glimpse of the Kingdom and the next minute become their greatest obstacle in finding the Kingdom.

One of my favorite authors and pastors, Frederick Buechner, talks about what saints are. Listen to this definition: "In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints." Maybe that sounds a little odd to you, but theological, it is exactly right. Throughout

scripture, we are told about the God who loves us; yet we are often too consumed with other things to notice. So God, wanting our attention, passes by, dropping his handkerchief, hoping we'll notice, hoping that we'll have reason to come talk with him. Saints do that. Saints, through whatever means, somehow manage to convey to us God's interest in us, God's longing for us. And like laces, can become the point that begins to tie us to the God who loves us. God works through his saints.

When asked to define a saint, author and pastor Thomas Long builds on the thought of Keirkegaard in saying that a saint is someone whose life manages to be more than a "cranny through which the infinite peeps." "The saint is someone who somehow manages to live in two worlds. The saint's faith has enabled him or her to release some of the tight grip by which most people hold on to this world and then is paradoxically able to receive this world as a gift. Eyes on the infinite, the saint manages to be thoroughly involved in the finite. The saint manages to chart his or her life by the stars, but walks on thoroughly solid earth."

Who are those dropped handkerchiefs in your life? Those who have let the infinite flood in to your life? You wouldn't be here without them. Jesus offers some identifiers of saints, in case you're having trouble thinking of a couple. He runs through that list of blessed ones and woeful ones: the poor, the hungry, the ones who sorrow. So often, we look at these people and think they are people we have to do ministry to; but Jesus says they are the ones through whom the kingdom breaks into your life, our lives. Have you given any of them the chance to do that in your life yet? Jesus goes on in his list, the ones who love their enemies, the ones who do good to those who hate, the ones who turn the other cheek, the givers, the ones who treat others as they wish to be treated. Does that list jar any names loose for you? Have those saints walked solidly through your life? Have you crossed paths yet?

Saints come in all kinds of forms. Here's a poem that was sent to me about a saint:

A minister passing through his church in the middle of the day,
Decided to pause by the altar and see who had come to pray.
Just then the back door opened, a man came down the aisle,
The minister frowned as he saw the man hadn't shaved in a while.
His shirt was kind a shabby and his coat was worn and frayed,
The man knelt, he bowed his head, then rose and walked away.
In the days that followed, each noon time came this chap,
Each time he knelt just for a moment, a lunch pail in his lap.
Well, the minister's suspicions grew, with robbery a main fear,

He decided to stop the man and ask him, "What are you doing here?"
The old man said, he worked down the road. Lunch was half an hour.
Lunchtime was his prayer time, for finding strength and power.
"I stay only moments, see, because the factory is so far away;
As I kneel here talking to the Lord, this is kind a what I say:

"I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, LORD, HOW HAPPY I'VE BEEN,
SINCE WE FOUND EACH OTHER'S FRIENDSHIP AND YOU TOOK AWAY MY SIN.
DONT KNOW MUCH OF HOW TO PRAY, BUT I THINK ABOUT YOU EVERYDAY.
SO, JESUS, THIS IS JIM, CHECKING IN TODAY."

The minister feeling foolish, told Jim, that was fine.
He told the man he was welcome to come and pray just anytime.
Time to go, Jim smiled, said "Thanks." He hurried to the door
The minister knelt at the altar, he'd never done it before.
His cold heart melted, warmed with love, and met with Jesus there.
As the tears flowed, in his heart, he repeated old Jim's prayer:

"I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, LORD, HOW HAPPY I'VE BEEN,
SINCE WE FOUND EACH OTHER'S FRIENDSHIP AND YOU TOOK AWAY MY SIN.
IDONT KNOW MUCH OF HOW TO PRAY, BUT I THINK ABOUT YOU EVERYDAY.
SO, JESUS, THIS IS ME CHECKING IN TODAY."

Past noon one day, the minister noticed that old Jim hadn't come.
As more days passed without Jim, he began to worry some.
At the factory, he asked about him, learning he was ill.
The hospital staff was worried, but he'd given them a thrill.
The week that Jim was with them, brought changes in the ward.
His smiles, a joy contagious. Changed people, were his reward.
The head nurse couldn't understand why Jim was so glad,
When no flowers, calls or cards came, Not a visitor he had.
The minister stayed by his bed, he voiced the nurse's concern:
No friends came to show they cared. He had nowhere to turn.
Looking surprised, old Jim spoke up and with a winsome smile;
"The nurse is wrong, she couldn't know, that in here all the while
Everyday at noon He's here, a dear friend of mine, you see,
He sits right down, takes my hand, leans over and says to me:

"I JUST CAME AGAIN TO TELL YOU, JIM, HOW HAPPY I HAVE BEEN,
SINCE WE FOUND THIS FRIENDSHIP, AND I TOOK AWAY YOUR SIN.

ALWAYS LOVE TO HEAR YOU PRAY, I THINK ABOUT YOU EACH DAY,
AND SO JIM, THIS IS JESUS, CHECKING IN TODAY."

God drops handkerchiefs all around us. God is desperate for our attention. And so often, God doesn't use the fancy hanky, the embroidered ones, the ones with frills and delicate colors. So often they can at first appear quite humble, ordinary, possibly even worn. But these are what God's saints are. Courting us into relationship with Him. God wants your attention. Have you noticed him yet crossing your path?

Quite possibly, that was the most beautiful handkerchief God ever dropped. That day the cross was in his path... There on Calvary's hill, God left for us a beautiful handkerchief—ordinary looking at first, with the ordinary looking man there on it, one who had taught and preached like many others before him, one who had lived in the house down the road and walked many paths with others who crossed his. But what made it more than ordinary that day was the blood painted there on it, poured out like fine needlework, telling a beautiful story about the God who loves us and desperately needs us to notice him, to be drawn up in him, to fall in love with him.

For thirty-five years, you here at All Saints Lutheran Church have been dropped hanky's for Valusia County. Thirty-five years of being outlets of God's love. Thirty-five years of letting the Infinite break in through your finite acts of service. Thirty-five years of being saints and sinners at the same time. Saint-making and saint-being is something to celebrate. That's a legacy you can be proud of. But I hope it's not a legacy you are done with.

Once God has our attention, once the life-long courtship begins in us, God has a tendency to use us as handkerchiefs ourselves. God's expectation is that through us, we become crevices where his Kingdom can breakthrough for others. Through us, God calls the whole world into loving relationship. Through us, God gets the world's attention. And the trick for me seems to be how to get us to be big outlets for God's love and flirting instead of tiny little trickles.

The story is told of a group of farmers many years ago who decided to eat their best potatoes and to plant only the small ones. They kept up this practice for many years, even though they noticed the potatoes getting smaller and smaller. They blamed the weather and the beetles and the blight. They kept it up until all of their potatoes were reduced to the size of large marbles. The farmers learned through bitter experience that they could not keep the best things of life for themselves and

use the leftovers for seed. The laws of life and nature decreed that the harvest would reflect the planting.

This time of the year in Lutheran churches all over our country is a season of stewardship emphasis. I hope you're spending time talking about what you are planting and sowing through your giving. If we plant small, if we invest small, our return will be small. It's simply the law of the harvest. I like to think big. I'd like big harvests. And I'm not just talking about money. But our time. And our talents. And all the other things about us God could use to announce to the world how much He loves us. I'd love to see an enormous harvest of saints, produced because All Saints Lutheran Church invested big. Because saint production was a priority. We tried to increase the outlet God had at His disposal to pour out His love.

Imagine how different this community could look if each of us were dropped as God's handkerchiefs, scattered throughout Port Orange and Valusia County. What kind of impact would that kind of flirting make? How many would come to know how much they are loved? How many lives would have Cross-shaped paths? If the harvest was that big, who would notice? Would you?