



Helpers

September 12, 2021: Holy Eucharist Rite II for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

O Lord: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

Today is an important day. It is the first September Sunday in two years that we have gathered in this space. It is the day after we marked as nation the 20th anniversary of the attacks on the Twin Towers. And, it is the day we welcome Owen Salvatore Rocco into the Body of Christ at this font, following in the footsteps of his cousins Grace, Abby, and Emma. (Cousin Tessa was baptized at the font in the Chapel.)

I have a mix of feelings about this day. I am so grateful to be here with you. I am so grateful to be baptizing the child of a couple at whose wedding I officiated. Rocco and Kim were married in this space just over three years ago. I enjoyed the same gift with John and Stephanie, and their daughters Tessa and Emma.

I'm grateful the wider community can be together with Owen and his family. I did a handful of private baptisms during the pandemic, and this is better! I am grateful to gather again with the choir and Pam and Charles, in this new arrangement, and that we can sing, even if we will be muffled by these darned masks. I'm grateful that at least in this little corner of the world, we seem to have managed to live with the virus. I'm grateful that we have managed in so many ways to reimagine what it means to be church and community.

I'm also anxious about the future. It's not yet clear to me what our Church School program will look like. It's not clear to me what attendance will look like. It's not clear to me what our annual appeal will look like. We are thin on the ground with regard to lay participation in the leadership of worship. As a larger community, we seem to have come to a kind of balance with regard to living with the virus, yet things can change quickly, and a kind of calm vigilance remains necessary. Our political and cultural situation makes me nervous.

I'm heart-sick about the lives that were lost and broken in the Twin Tower attacks themselves, and as well as the lives lost and broken in the rescue efforts. I'm heart-sick about the rippling effects of death, injury, mental illness, and displacement on millions of Americans, Afghans, and Iraqis, civilian and military. I'm angry about the trillions of dollars doled out to the military-industrial complex to conduct war when we need things like bridges, roads, broadband internet, affordable housing and medical care. It is not clear to me just what good twenty years of fighting did.

However, and, especially, I'm hopeful. Reading and seeing so much this week about the attacks and their aftermath, one cannot but also be inspired by the generosity and heroism of which ordinary people are capable. As former President Bush said in a speech yesterday, it was thirty-three ordinary Americans and seven crew who heroically prevented Flight 93 from reaching the White House and gave their lives in the process. Such selflessness, such kindness, all remain as potential within each one of us. A 9/11 widow



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from Foxborough was featured on one of the shows commemorating the attacks. She said, “Would I have wished this tragedy? Never. Have there been blessings that have come from it? Yes.” Thousands of our soldiers gave their lives protecting women and children in Afghanistan. One of the bywords that I encountered a number of times in these accounts was Mr. Roger’s exhortation to look for “look for the helpers.” So many helpers appeared in countless places.

And so what does today’s Gospel speak into this time?

If we were to emblazon these words on a big banner on Highland Avenue, I’m not sure whether the crowds would swarm in: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

And yet: I hope that everyone with in the sound of my voice has had the experience of losing their life and yet finding that their life has been saved, that new life has been found. Maybe you lost your life, not because you wanted to, by no choice of your own, but somehow, by God’s grace, you have found a new life. Those who are parents may have examples close at hand of how you gave up your life and have found it. Sleepless nights, permanently postponed dreams, hard conversations, devastating setbacks, silent disappointments, heartbreaking sorrows: Life lost.

And also: heart-filling joys, life-giving connections, belly-busting laughter, heart-expanding pride, quiet satisfactions, unexpected triumphs, God-given opportunities: Life saved. And there have been helpers along the way, God’s fingerprints in our lives.

God has somehow set up the world this way: where there is great love, there will also be great grief. That’s the trade-off. And the new life, the saved life, is in that space where love and grief meet. Staying close to Jesus helps us to learn how that new life, that saved life emerges when we give up the life that we thought was ours. But it is not easy. Life, and in particular, the life of faith, is a struggle. As is clear in today’s Gospel, Jesus never promises freedom from struggle. But if we cling to him, he promises to be present with us in that struggle, and that new life, that saved life comes to those who struggle to find God in the circumstances in our lives where Jesus is our helper.

Owen, I know you can’t understand this yet, but you have come into a complicated world. Our families are complex organisms. The world beyond our families sometimes seems like it’s coming apart. But Owen, when you find yourself in struggle, your helpers are all around. Look for the helpers.

You are now beginning to have the ability to see beyond your Mom’s and Dad’s adoring faces as they hold you or feed you or put you to bed. In a moment, your young eyes will begin to bring into focus the helpers who are all around you. We promise to uphold you in your life of faith. Your parents and godparents of course are important, but this is the wider Body of Christ. And these Christians are not just here in this



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Church, but throughout the world, and are here to be your helpers, too. And more important, you are to become one of these helpers, too, who will be there in the darkest hour for someone else, with Jesus as your guide. In a moment, not only will we reaffirm our own promise to be helpers, we will pray for you to become a helper, too.

And so, we give thanks for being together. We give thanks for the new life of baptism. We give thanks for the new life, the saved life that comes when we lose our lives with Jesus. We give thanks for the helpers in our midst, and for the call to be helpers ourselves. **Amen.**