

All Saints Sunday 2011

Revelation 7:9-17

Psalm 34:1-10, 22

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

On the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro  
In Jardim Gramacho,  
one of the biggest dumps in the world,  
Thousands of people live and work.  
They build houses out of scrap lumber,  
They eat the freshest of the foods they find.  
They harvest articles of every kind to recycle and repurpose.

When a photographer from National Geographic came a few years ago,  
A man from the community showed him around,  
Taking him to meet the young mothers who nurse their children here  
And the crews who work their way through the rubble.  
Finally, they climbed a high hill  
In the middle of the dump,  
And looked all around.  
“I know it’s garbage,”  
said the man from Jardim Gramacho  
to the photographer from National Geographic,  
“but it’s beautiful up here.  
I wish you could see it under the full moon.  
It’s so beautiful.”

That man is a saint.

The saints are those who can climb a hill of garbage  
And say,  
“I know it’s garbage,  
but it’s so beautiful.”

The blessedness of the saints is the grace  
To see the beauty of the world  
Within and around and through the garbage.

What can they mean?  
How can a hill of garbage be beautiful?

Of course you can make art out of garbage;  
You can create beauty in unexpected ways.

You can look at something in a new way and say,  
Oh – it's beautiful.

But this is something more.  
This seeing, the vision of the saints,  
Is an act of faith.  
Is, in fact, the essence of faith.

Until this seeing happens,  
Garbage is garbage.  
And then, with the eyes of faith,  
It is beautiful.

When we don't see it,  
We imagine that faith means believing that garbage is beautiful  
When it clearly is not.

We assume faith means believing  
the meek will inherit the earth,  
while clearly they – or we –  
are making no progress.

If you go to Colfax and Broadway,  
Or Skyline Park  
And spend some time with those who occupy that piece of Denver  
Will you see the meek inheriting the earth?  
You could insist it was so,  
But who would believe you?

Can that be what faith is,  
Insisting something must be true,  
When it so clearly is not?

Or what about this?  
Is faith assuming  
That some magic will happen  
At some future time,  
Some magic  
That will turn the garbage beautiful  
And give the earth to the meek  
And bring peace and mercy,  
So that all the blessings come true?

No.  
Hard as it is to believe,  
Faith is something different.

The faith of the saints is about now,  
A new now.  
The faith of the saints  
Lets them see right through the reality we live in  
And find within it the living heart of God.

When that happens,  
Garbage is beautiful,  
While it is still garbage,  
Without being made into something else.

When that seeing happens,  
The meek are the ones who occupy the earth,  
Even before the old powers fail.

But how can we begin to see as the saints see?

No amount of effort can make it happen.  
And anyone can do it.  
That faith is there for us.  
We are all intended to be saints.

So – how does it happen  
That we begin to see  
The beauty of the garbage under the full moon?

Through many generations,  
Our tradition, like others,  
Has taught that there are some simple ways  
To put ourselves in the way of seeing.

We don't make ourselves see.  
We do the things that bring us sight.

One way  
Is to focus on scripture,  
Prayer, worship,  
And social justice.

Scripture is holy ground  
Where God is living and active.  
When we step onto that holy ground,  
God comes to meet us,  
And in that encounter,  
We can change.  
Reading the Bible is one way to gain our sight.

Praying is one way to gain our sight.  
Prayer is conversation with God,  
Speaking and listening  
To the one who is closer than our own hearts  
And infinitely beyond our knowing.  
When we listen and respond,  
We can begin to open up to something new.

Do we want to do this?  
Do we mean it when we sing,  
The saints of God are just like me  
And I mean to be one too?

Sometimes we want this with all our hearts.  
Sometimes it seems too hard.  
Sometimes we would rather wait a little while.

If everything in your life is just fine,  
And you are confident that it will always be that way,  
Then there is no reason to embark on the journey  
That begins with scripture, prayer,  
Worship, and social justice.

But if you sometimes look around and wonder,  
Is there something more than all this garbage?  
Then this journey  
Will lead you to the place  
where beauty shines through everything,  
every tree and leaf and flower,  
every dog and cat and child  
every tin can and rotten turnip.

I believe this is true.

Worship is the place where we glimpse this truth,  
Where ordinary people and things,  
In a moment of eternity,  
Reveal the heart of life –  
And then we blink, and come back to the day,  
And go out into the world.

And in the world,  
We find the ones who are waiting for us.  
When we find ways to see and touch and talk to people  
Whose suffering and needs are different from our own,

Then we put ourselves in a place  
Where change can happen for us,  
And a new sight can enhance the old.

This is what the saints do.

The blessedness of the saints is a disposition of the heart and mind  
and it is active  
engaged in the world in visible, tangible ways.

Because the saints can see through the garbage  
and connect with the beauty  
they are free.  
The vision of the saints sets them free  
To act, unchained from anxiety and judgment and fear.

That can happen here.  
St. Andrew's is a place where,  
Through these encounters,  
We can receive our sight.  
We work for it,  
Yet it comes unearned,  
As pure gift.

Some of you have done this, I believe,  
And now make the daily choices  
That keep that vision clear.

The rest of us can make the daily choices too –  
Choices to begin, or begin again,  
Those practices and habits  
That set us free to receive the gift  
That is always offered.

When we receive our sight,  
Then we look at garbage,  
And see that it is garbage –  
And it is more.

When we receive our sight,  
we see God,  
Everywhere, always.

So let's look again at that hill of garbage.

Since the photographer from National Geographic

Stood on the hill of garbage  
And heard that it was beautiful,  
Change has come to Jardim Gramacho.

Those who once were squatters and scavengers  
Are now organized.  
The leader of the *catadores*, as they are called,  
Is a young man named Tiao Santos.

He walks through the streets of garbage  
With a radiant smile,  
Dreadlocks flying.

He is the central figure in a new documentary;  
A picture of him,  
Made of garbage,  
Just sold at auction,  
Bringing \$50,000 back to Jardim Gramacho.

Profits from the movie and art show  
have returned to the people.  
They have bought a new truck,  
Established a library,  
And a health center.

The dump will soon be replaced with a recycling center.  
The *catadores*, who first saw the uses for all that garbage,  
Will train the recyclers.

That can happen here.

The 99% may not occupy Wall Street yet,  
Or Denver or a hundred other places.

But in one corner of God's good earth,  
The meek have inherited a garbage dump.  
And are building a new future.

What they have done,  
We can do.

I believe we can open this community up  
To the power of God,  
And take our place among the saints.  
The world is waiting for us  
To find its beauty,

here and now.

[Waste Land trailer and website](#)

[NYT article](#) on artist Vik Muniz and the Tiao Santos portrait made of garbage