

All Saints' Sunday
November 2, 2025
The Rev. Scott Walters

Earlier this fall I attended a lecture at Rhodes College by Danielle Allen. I saw some other Calvary folk there. I think they'll back me up when I say it was a remarkable talk. Dr. Allen is a professor of political philosophy and ethics at Harvard. Her text for the night was the second sentence in the Declaration of Independence. It's the one that begins, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." It's a sentence that is longer than many paragraphs, but a sentence it is. Periods were apparently in short supply in the latter 18th century.

Danielle Allen began by telling us how the Declaration as a whole had come to matter so much to her. Her first teaching job was at the University of Chicago, where some of the country's brightest young minds had to set their alarm clocks to roll out of bed in time to stumble into a 10 a.m. class. But at night, her classrooms filled with adults who might have struggled with unreliable childcare arrangements, worked one of their two jobs all day, fed their families dinner, and caught the last bus that would get them to class on time. Much to her surprise, the first group, the ones in sweatpants and boxer shorts, seemed more haggard. The night class pulsed with energy. She soon came to see that her night school students were not only hungry to learn. They were in class because they wanted their lives to change.

This second group of students taught Professor Allen something about the Declaration of Independence. Through them she came to see that this was a document written by and for people who wanted their lives to change. And while the framers submitted their facts and arguments to "a candid world"—that is, to all of humankind—the Declaration's inherited wisdom is especially precious and relevant to people who share a deep, if not a desperate, dissatisfaction with the status quo. Howard Thurman's famous line comes to mind, insisting that we ask what Christianity means to the masses who live "with their backs constantly against the wall..."

More than once, Danielle Allen, a black woman, has been asked how the Declaration of Independence could be such a life changing inheritance for someone like her. After all, it's pretty clear that what "all men are created equal" originally meant was, "all white property-owning males are created equal." But she still believes that at least the seeds of her own equality before the law were present in the text, and especially in the debates behind it.

In claiming this document as her own inheritance, her own "patrimony" she even calls it, Danielle Allen embodies a complicated truth about our world. If you refuse to receive wisdom from forebears who are flawed, sinful, and even dangerously wrong

about some things, you will have no inheritance at all. Which is to say you'll be left entirely alone to make up entirely from scratch the perfect life you apparently think is possible. Good luck with that. Do I need to trot out the most recent loneliness statistics in yet another sermon as evidence for how well that project seems to be going?

So, I offer these questions for your consideration on this All Saints' Sunday. First, are you willing to receive the inheritance that is your Christian faith from that flawed and sinful and glorious communion of saints we call the Church? Like one's American inheritance, discernment will still be required. Every bag of patrimony is a mixed one. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be a viable alternative. Secondly, what is that Christian inheritance? More precisely, where would you go to find its essence, like Danielle Allen goes to that meandering second sentence of the Declaration of Independence?

"Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh..." So begins the gospel lesson for this All Saints' Sunday. This is the passage our spiritual forbears chose to drop into our midst on the day we honor what we've received from them.

It's often called the Sermon on the Plain, Luke's more compact version of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. Today I'm less interested in how the two texts differ than whether and how they take us to the heart of our Christian inheritance. I'd even propose that "Love your enemies" is how the rambling essential teaching within the Christian Declaration of our Interdependence, if you will, begins.

If this is indeed the essence of the Christian way, what do we see if we look at the Bible through it? What does the essence or arc of scripture seem to be by the light of the Sermon on the Plain? It's a little longer than the second sentence of the Declaration, but here's a sketch of what this Christian sees. Creation was not the result of a violent struggle between the gods, like the prevailing myths once described. It was the gift of one loving God who declared every created thing to be good. Things went wrong, not when an evil, lesser god began wreaking havoc, but when we refused to live within the gift and abundance that is the true nature of reality. Sin entered when the relationships between the good things of creation got out of whack. We grasped for what we were counseled not to grasp for, and a world of gift and plenty and friends became a world of scarcity and threats and enemies. Before long, our estrangements went violent when one jealous brother kills another. And ever since, that violence has kept ricocheting between our lives. I return the hurt I receive, thinking I've set things a little more right, when I'm really just perpetuating the same old sinful cycle. "Please. Leave the vengeance to me," God pleads over and over again.

"How do we break the cycle?" is what the Bible keeps asking in different times and different places. Jesus steps into that long line of prophetic responses

and says, "Here's how: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

Can you see what a disruption actually living this way would make in the old sin bound cycles? We made enemies out of siblings once upon a time. Jesus says we'll only get free when we make our enemies back into the siblings they truly are, by basically turning the way you and I have been taught to live in a vengeful, enemy-producing world, entirely upside down. It's a hard teaching. Maybe the hardest. But it is the essence and the shape of Jesus's entire life, death, and resurrection, is it not? The question for us is whether we receive this inheritance as people who want this teaching, this Jesus, to actually change our lives.

It may make me one of the enemies Jesus is asking you to love today, but when Erika Kirk said she forgave her husband's murderer at his memorial service, it looked to me like she was allowing this teaching to make a claim on her life in a terrible moment. "I forgive him because it is what Christ did and is what Charlie would do," she said. "The answer to hate is not hate. The answer we know from the gospel is love and always love. Love for our enemies and love for those who persecute us." Her husband said some things I found to be in deep and sometimes dangerous opposition to the way of Jesus. I am not making light of this in the least. When the President stepped to the same microphone minutes later and said he disagreed, that he hates those who oppose him and wishes nothing good for them at all, joking or not, he was saying the way of Jesus made no such claim on his life. And we were back to business as usual in a world of animus and enemies.

I risked this example for a reason. You see, I still don't want to receive any of the inheritance of Jesus from some people. But this world is still so thoroughly at war with itself that there will be people I experience as enemies who are trying to live the way of Jesus as surely as I am. Unfortunately, I don't think Jesus is asking me to love the enemies it seems noble to forgive or the ones who are wrong only up to a point. To break the cycle completely in a life, in a moment, just as Jesus did, forgiving his executioners from the cross, must mean something more.

On All Saints' Day I wonder if the Church drops this teaching into our laps to remind us that the communion of saints is filled with unlovable enemies too. We have no choice but to receive our spiritual inheritance from flawed and sinful and violent people. But when we learn to do just that, perhaps a crack in a cog opens up in the old enemy-making machine that this world has been since the beginning. In fact, maybe All Saints' Day is the day we're reminded that the Church

isn't the place where we get free of enemies Jesus asks us to love. It's where he traps us with some of the most obnoxious ones and says, "Here we are, folks. Shall we get on with it?"

I will leave you with a few lines from a prayer written by a complicated, occasionally profane Christian saint named Stanley Hauwerwas. It has haunted me for years, and has become a model for how truthful confession of how far I am from the essence of the Christian way can be a place from which I can at least pray for the desire for my life to change.

Forgiving Lord, I do not want my enemies forgiven... I fear losing my enemies, since my hates are more precious to me than my loves. If I lost my hates, my enemies, how would I know who I am? Yet you have bent us toward reconciliation, that we may be able to pass one another Christ's peace. It is a terrible thing to ask of us. I am sure I cannot do it, but you are a wily God able to accomplish miracles. May we be struck alive with the miracle of your grace, even to being reconciled with ourselves. Amen.

Friend, who are your unlovable enemies? If forgiving the likes of them seems like an impossible burden, what is the weight of the precious hates we hold onto more tightly even than our loves? If forgiveness is costly, what is the cost of letting our enemies, rather than Jesus, tell us who we are in some deep, essential way? Come to think of it, what kind of life do we think our hates can actually save? Isn't Jesus's strange other way at least worth receiving as our essential Christian inheritance, if only for the chance that we might be struck alive by the miracle of God's grace, even to being reconciled not just to our enemies, but with ourselves?