

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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All Saints, Luke 6:20-31

Come Holy Spirit and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Sam Eyde celebrated his 156th birthday last weekend.ⁱ Born in Norway on October 29, 1866, he studied engineering in Berlin. Following graduation in 1891, Eyde started work with the railroad authority in Hamburg, until, six years later, he partnered with his first boss to start a new business. At the turn of the twentieth century, their partnership would become Norsk Hydro, a firm specializing in metals, fertilizer, and hydro-electric power. In 2017 [the most recent fiscal year The Google Machines would report to me], the firm realized revenues of some \$10.7 billion US dollars.

In its early years, Norsk Hydro sought the natural force of waterfalls to power its electricity plants, which, in turn, would power massive factories at the sites. The search for these waterfalls took Eyde back to his native Norway, and among his first and most significant projects involved the *Rjukanfossen*, a spectacular, 304-foot natural waterfall. Imagine Copley Square turned on its side, and a waterfall running that length and breadth. Between 1905 and 1912, Eyde's firm founded a town at the falls – *Rjukan* – an undertaking which involved 12,000 Swedish, Danish, and Finish laborers at its peak, and cost two-times the Norwegian national budget to complete.

Long past its prime as an industrial stronghold, tourism now fuels the Rjukan economy. For the European urbanites seeking refuge at the Rjukanfossen, the massive waterfall lends an idyllic soundtrack to the valley community's mild summers. However, as it has been since the community's founding more than one hundred years ago, from September to March of every year, the whole village of 3,400 – every man, woman, and child ... every home and every store and every school – *lives in shadow.*

Today we celebrate the Feast of All Saints, when, as the old prayer reads, we “yield unto [God] most high praise and hearty thanks for the wonderful grace and virtue declared in *all* [the] saints, most humbly beseeching [God] to give us grace so to follow [their examples] ... ”ⁱⁱ

On this occasion we recall the lives of those who were faithful in the past, to inspire our fidelity in the present. We express these aspirations in the renewal of our Baptismal Covenant, and, following the Creedal calls-and-responses, we pray six promises. The first two of these emphasize our interior life and our personal devotions, our faithfulness to the fundamental practices of Beloved Community: prayer and study, worship and fellowship, and our continual need to seek God's mercy. Then, the evangelical call of the third promise – “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”ⁱⁱⁱ – the Covenant turns us toward the world in witness to God's Love ... turns us outside of ourselves, in witness God's Love for us and our Love of God in response.

The charge that follows – “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself”^{iv} – calls us to be generous with one another as God has been generous to us, as gracious with the annoying, the frustrating, and the disagreeable, as with the wise, the warm, and the enjoyable. Even when the stakes are higher, our Baptismal Covenant calls us to offer our best as though we will receive nothing less in return.

In Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” from today’s Gospel, Jesus establishes this Golden-Rule standard, a practice as demanding as it is clear:

I say to you that listen, 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.^v

From that foundation of generosity – not as an either-or, mind you, but as an essential first step – *then* the the Covenant’s final couplet calls us to consider not only our own behavior, but the “behaviors” of our society, of our culture, and of our governments.

Surrounded on all sides by substantial elevations [the same heights that create the falls’ force], the tilt of the earth on its axis angles the sun’s light upon the Rjukan valley in just such a way that casts the village in perpetual shade for half the year: while the sun splashes the snow-covered hilltops surrounding the township, its shine never reaches the valley floor, and the community enters an eerie, blue-gray darkness. Not to make too little of our abbreviated New England winter daylight – turning-back-the-clock last night to those 3PM nightfalls prompting varying levels of “Seasonal Affective Disorder” in every household^{vi} – consider the prospect of *six months* without sunlight in your windows.

Well, Sam Eyde worried how this dreary season would affect his townspeople, and – at least as importantly, I suspect – how their winter malaise might decrease productivity in his investment. Looking for a solution to keep his workers working, he installed a cable car to ferry the townspeople from their dark valley to bright parks above them. Later, the town carved a railway inside a neighboring mountain to ensure peak access even during winter.

More recently, Rjukan unveiled “The Mirror Project,” a municipally-funded undertaking to bring light into the town square. At the top of one of those surrounding hills, officials installed three large mirrors to catch the sun’s light and reflect it into the village below. A computer system guides the solar-powered mirrors to follow the sun’s path across every day’s sky, providing a constant glow in the center of their fellowship.

Naively, when I first read the headline concerning the mirrors, I thought they would somehow light the whole town, that the video attendant to the news article would show a time-lapse production revealing a warm, pink light moving gently and steadily across storefronts and rooftops and newly-greened lawns until the whole town was awash in morning. Instead, the

mirrors create a relatively small, oval-ish light on the town square, a spotlight of sun not much larger than our nave.

Even so, that one splash of Rjukan sunlight *has* brightened the whole town. On the day of the unveiling, shop owners took off from work; schools closed; children boasted brightly colored suns painted on their cheeks; and everyone took turns walking in and out of the warm beam, smiling wide, shading their eyes with a hand to happy brows. Where there had been darkness, there was now light.

Surely we live in a world of many ills, a time and a place always tempting us with its disaffections. And the sicker the world becomes, the greater our temptation to side with its shadows as “the smart play,” to fight fire with fire, to expect the worst of ourselves and one another. Fortified as we are with our hurt and fear, we bless responding to disappointments with commiserations; we license reacting to anger with violence; we justify further cruelties, even wars. Forging a grim alliance, we overlook Jesus’ commissions, and we forget the Covenant promises we have made.

Yet, people of God, be reminded that we also live in a world of impossible beauty and hope, a time and a place where a New England November can surprise us with a series of entirely unearned 70-degree days ... where we can welcome sweet babies at this font and even one young chorister old enough to announce for himself his desire to be baptized into Christ’s Beloved Community ... where the power of Love has prevailed in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ – prevailed once and forever! – so that we may choose to be “lights of the world”^{vii} in *our* several generations ... where we may reflect God’s Love, giving as generously as God hopes for the world to be generous, shining light where we are, as we can, no matter the shadows about us.

And a patch of sun about as big as this Trinity Church nave? Well that seems like a very good place to begin.

With gladness and singleness of heart,
Amen.

ⁱ I first read about The Mirror Project in a CNN article on an All Saints Day about a decade ago. Though CNN didn’t know it was All Saints Day, I found meaning in the synchronicity, and I’ve returned to the story more than once since then. The story led me through internet rabbit holes about Norway, Norsk Hydro, and Sam Eyde (as well as several pronunciation guides). Among these adventures, I especially appreciated [the “Visit Rjukan” site](#), which includes a video featuring great imagery of the setting.

ⁱⁱ From “The Burial of the Dead, Rite I” in the *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 487.

ⁱⁱⁱ From “The Baptismal Covenant” in the *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 304-305.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Luke 6:27-31.

^{vi} Isn't there a better way to handle this, New England?

^{vii} More of that prayer from the burial office referenced earlier. Though not an official "All Saints" prayer, it voices the energies and intentions of this day, and I draw this sermon's title from the line I italicize: "Almighty and everlasting God, we yield unto thee most high praise and hearty thanks for the wonderful grace and virtue declared in all thy saints, who have been the choice vessels of thy grace, *and the lights of the world in their several generations*; most humbly beseeching thee to give us grace so to follow the example of their steadfastness in thy faith, and obedience to thy holy commandments, that at the day of the general resurrection, we, with all those who are of the mystical body of thy Son, may be set on his right hand, and hear that his most joyful voice: 'Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Grant this, O Father, for the sake of the same thy Son Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate. **Amen.**"