

*All Saints' Sunday*

*November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour  
Mill Valley, California*

*Playing with Probabilities  
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

Early on a Monday morning a few weeks ago, I gave up my day off, dropped Daniel at nursery school, and headed down to the Civic Center for an 8:30 summons. . .to jury duty. Going in for the annual jury day of service is rather like going to the airport: hurry up and wait. As a matter of fact, San Francisco's civil court jury waiting room is rather like an airport these days: an internet plug and an outlet for your laptop if you need it, and a lot of fixed-to-the-floor chairs. There's one difference: you just don't know when or if the plane is ever going to take off. More to the point, you don't know if you'll be on board or not if it does.

So best to take something to read. It was a long morning, punctuated by the voice of one of the jury officers calling periodically for a potential jurist to approach the counter. . .and by the snores of the man who fell asleep a row or two back. I broke out my book: *Leaving Church* by Barbara Brown Taylor, hoping that her nurturing writing might instruct me how *not* to have to leave church.

The man sitting next to me occasionally looked up from his *New York Times* to shoot me a furtive glance. Not surprising, I suppose. I was decked out in my collar, hoping shamelessly that if I were called to interview for a panel that my clericals would spook off either or both attorneys or even the judge, and I'd get out of having to sit through a trial. There was just too much to do here at Church of Our Saviour!

I responded to the man's glances with an occasional smile and swam through Taylor's eloquent prose while trying not to think about the odds – the probability of my landing on a jury. A banana, a yogurt, and a few hours later, with threats looming that a court room upstairs was about to call a group up to interview, the man turned to me, shook his head, and began to talk.

He had just been reading in the *New York Times Book Review* about Richard Dawkin's newest bestselling release. Richard Dawkins, as some of you may know, is an avowed and very vocal atheist. And according to the gentleman sitting next to me, Dawkins had determined, through some formulaic and highly intellectual way, the improbability of God's "existence."

A bit to my surprise (I was in the City, after all!), this sophisticated reader sitting next to me found it all hogwash. Setting aside the philosophical and theological misunderstandings that we enter when we talk about God's "existence," determining the probability about whether or not there is a God seemed bordering on the silly. I confess I laughed. I told him I had never known anyone who entered a Christian community and stayed there simply because they had decided odds were that there is an Ultimate Reality.

Speaking of odds, I was fortunate. I wasn't summoned this year to go up for an interview. The courthouse released me about noon, handed me a little sheet of paper with my name scrawled on it to prove I had shown up, and I walked out into the sunshine of a bright day.

As I headed back to the car while reflecting on the brief conversation with the man in the jury waiting room, I realized that all the saints I know never messed with probabilities when it came to matters of faith. Instead, they rolled up their sleeves and jumped into the great sea of being that is God with abandon, embracing the salt and earth of their community, rough and tumble, ready to look into the eyes of death, if necessary, for the sake of the deep Love that's in their hearts and bones.

I just don't hear that coming from Dawkins. Atheism – probably a better description of his perspective would be thoroughgoing agnosticism – might be inclined to find a way to play it “safe.” But how much of our own being is narrowed if we only rely only on what we know within a reasonable degree of probability? How much are our hearts dimmed when we only live by what our fragile intellects can perceive?

No, the saints in light live and love according to that old adage that says, “The impossible we do every day. . .Miracles take a little longer.”

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Probabilities are, of course, the name of the game these days. Here we are, down to the wire in one of the most vitriolic campaign seasons in recent political memory with pundits, polls, and evening phone calls with the recorded voice of a candidate we've never heard of coming out of our ears and oozing out of our pores. With Evangelical pastors falling in flaming scandals, all political parties walking on eggshells, senators putting their foot in it (again), and presidents ducking for rhetorical cover. . .with all the tensions in our communities running high this election season. . .well, it's a wonder we can keep the peace with our neighbors, let alone inside our hearts and minds.

As I'm too fond of saying, nothing has changed much in 2,000 years. Jesus was looking at the realities of crushing crowds, the mounting pressures on him from political and religious authorities, the tensions of his disciples with their confusion, arguing, and occasional bellyaching. And into that reality, he declares, “Blessed are the poor in spirit. . .”

“Blessed are those who mourn. . .” he continues. “Blessed are the meek. . .those who thirst and hunger for righteousness. . .the merciful. . .the pure in heart. . .”

“Blessed, blessed, blessed.” It seems Jesus blesses just about everyone who's been having a rough time and promises them sunshine and better days ahead, even when the storm clouds are gathering and things are likely to head towards a bloody end in Jerusalem.

Our Savior didn't play by probabilities, either. Nor does he expect us to. Instead, we are called to follow the saints into the salt and earth, the sea that is God, to face death sometimes and disagreement often, to wade into the turbulence of community with abandon.

Welcome to real community living in the Spirit. Welcome to the Church. Welcome to a place where the lid comes off the pressure cooker, people mess up often, and hearts show up sometimes badly broken. . .and then we are expected to get up, dust ourselves off, and give and receive blessings. Welcome to the communion of saints, where sins are forgiven, and a “great multitude that no one can count” stands around God’s throne shouting praise.

Happy All Saints and leave the probabilities at the door. We are here, each in our own messy way, to work improbable miracles for ourselves and others: for a world crying for salvation. We are here to push back the boundaries of reason, leap beyond limitation, and gaze deeply into the heart of Love. . . a Love that comes to us from the very center of being, and flows through us and over us, washing us until we look without blinking into the Light of the One who shapes our lives and the dance of the Cosmos, who summons us forward out of darkness death, and who forever remains with us, blessing us on our journey.

*Amen.*