Mr. Jack Jones  
All Saints’ Day  
November 1, 2020  

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10,13-14 & Matthew 5:1-12  

Almighty God, by your Holy Spirit you have made us one with your saints in heaven and on earth: Grant that in our earthly pilgrimage we may always be supported by this fellowship of love and prayer, and know ourselves to be surrounded by their witness to your power and mercy. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whom all our intercessions are acceptable through the Spirit, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen [BCP, 250].

Today we celebrate All Saints Day as we remember and give thanks for all the people whom God has called together to be the Church, to be the Body of Christ. We remember and celebrate Christians throughout the world and throughout time, those who have preceded us and those who will follow us. For we are all created eternity, for living with God and each other throughout the ages. I love the image of the great cloud of witnesses in the Book of Hebrews, I imagine them as the Communion of Saints, praying for us and cheering us on in our earthly pilgrimage. I love Jesus’ message this morning, telling those who felt like they weren’t worthy of God’s love, those who felt forgotten, passed by, ignored, burdened with grief and woes, that God loves them, God cares for them and they are a part of the Kingdom of God. God’s love is for everyone.

I want to begin with the Wisdom of Ben Sirach also known as Ecclesiasticus. This book is the equivalent of a self-help book but written about 2,200 years ago. Sirach offers wisdom about how to follow God and how to live a good life. At the end of the book he sings the praises of famous men and women as he recounts the history and heroes and heroines of Israel. He remembers the famous and those who were forgotten but before this song of praise he writes about the blue-collar workers of the city: the farmer, artisans, crafts people, blacksmiths, potters. He writes:

**All these rely on their hands, and all are skillful in their own work. Without them no city can be inhabited, and wherever they live, they will not go hungry. Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people, nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly. They do not sit in the judge’s seat, nor do they understand the decisions of the courts; they cannot expound discipline or judgement, and they are not found among the rulers.** But they maintain the fabric of the world, and their concern is for the exercise of their trade. [38:31-34, NRSV].

Sirach’s wisdom is still true today. After 9/11 we celebrated our police and firefighters whose work we had taken for granted. And today during this pandemic, we give thanks for the doctors and nurses
and healthcare workers on the frontlines of our hospitals, for ambulance drivers and funeral directors, for grocery store clerks and cashiers, for truck drivers and for mail carriers and delivery workers, for all the people who maintain the fabric of our world.

And so this morning I want to remember and celebrate the work and ministry of a saint of Norfolk, from a 165 years ago, Mr. John Jones, popularly known as Yellow Fever Jack. George Tucker wrote about him for the Virginia Pilot in 1994. He was an enslaved laborer who worked for a local funeral home. The following was written about him in one of the Richmond newspapers on August 28, 1855:

Among those who have rendered themselves conspicuous for faithful services in these trying times, we have to notice John Jones, a mulatto slave, employed by Messrs. O'Brien and Quick, who in his humble, but now highly important capacity of hearse driver, has by the unwearied and faithful performance of his really laborious duties, won for himself, the esteem and regard of the entire community. From the commencement of the disease, Jones has been actively employed night and day, in driving the ill-fated fever victims to the Cemetery. In many instances having to shoulder the coffins in which were the bodies of the dead, and place them in his hearse without any assistance whatever. All the friends of the deceased having fled panic struck from the corpses.

Night and day the rattling of the dismal ‘car of death’ could be heard rapidly driven by Jones, who sat in his seat ‘solitary and alone,’ (except the silent passenger within,) puffing away at a long nine, and looking as cool and unconcerned as if he was driving a gay party to a festive picnic! So he has continued up to this hour - and it is fearful to contemplate how many poor wretches he has driven to their last homes since the sixteenth of July. Probably not less than five hundred! And with the prospects ahead, if he survives the epidemic, he bids fair to ‘charioteer’ 500 more before the close of the awful drama! The people intend, by public subscription, to purchase the freedom of Jones should he be so fortunate as to pass safely through the fever, as a reward of his courageous, cheerful and faithful conduct in his ‘particular line,’ throughout the epidemic.

It’s hard to imagine the deathly silence of Norfolk, as Mr. Jones ministered to the dead. Many thought he himself would die but Mr. Jones survived the epidemic. The people of Norfolk raised funds to purchase his freedom but he declined because under Virginia law a freed slave had to leave the commonwealth within a year. He died in August 1868 and his obituary was on the front page of one
of the local papers, an unheard-of honor for an African American at that time. He is buried in West Point Cemetery off Princess Anne Road.

His funeral was attended by the Howard Society, a benevolent society created to assist the victims of yellow fever, and many of the citizens of the city. Today we remember his selfless dedication and all those whose names are forgotten but known to God. Today we celebrate Mr. Jones and all the saints who work together for the common good. In Christ’s Name, amen.

The Rev. Scott Hennessy