

Message: “A Legacy of the Positive”

Do you know who this person is? It’s Penn Jillette, of Penn and Teller the magician duo. Penn is an outspoken atheist. Many of you know that. What you probably don’t know is that Penn posted a YouTube video inviting Christians to share their faith.

About 10 years ago, Penn was signing autographs after a show when he noticed a man standing over to the side. The person walked over to Penn, complimented him on the show and handed him a New Testament.

As Penn tells it, ‘[They] said, “I wanted you to have this. I’m kind of proselytizing.”’ Then he said, “I’m a businessman. I’m sane. I’m not crazy.” And he looked Jillette right in the eyes.

Penn said, ‘**It was really wonderful.** I believe he knew that I was an atheist. But he was not defensive, and he looked me right in the eyes. And he was truly complimentary. It didn’t seem like empty flattery. He was really kind and nice and sane and looked me in the eyes and talked to me and then gave me this Bible.’

Jillette then said something that may surprise you, ‘I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize at all. If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward’

‘How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize?’ Penn asked. ‘How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn’t believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.’

Penn reiterated his impression of the person, ‘This guy was a really good guy. He was polite and honest and sane, and he cared enough about me to give me a Bible [with] a little note to me ... and then five phone numbers and an e-mail address if I wanted to get in touch.’¹

What an inspiring story from a least likely person.

¹ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/atheism-penn-jillette-urges-evangelism/>

Jesus’ most famous message is called the sermon on the mount.

We heard the first portion of it earlier, where Jesus shows us what it’s like to be part of a community that gives life through faith. It’s a narrative that gives us a powerful new, lifegiving vision to replace the negative, life draining narrative we hear every day. Jesus shows us the way to life here and now and for all eternity.

Jesus paints a visual image of the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven. It’s a place filled with hopeless, grieving, humble, hungry, merciful, true hearted and peacemaking people. Joy rules and all the rewards of heaven are theirs. Those who enter do so with the mind of Christ. They are confidant, glad, fed, compassionate and they see God in all things for they know they are God’s children. No matter what others may say, they freely and openly share their faith, hope and love through their lives, here and now and for all eternity. This is the legacy of Abraham brought to life. This is God’s blessing in action. Jesus came to open the doors for all who do likewise.

Jesus shows us our part, “*You are the light of the world. ... People don’t light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your God who is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:14-16, CEB).

God does the greater portion of salvation work. God made a promise and kept it. Jesus reminds us we have a role to play. We have work to do. We are invited to join in the divine work of passing God’s blessing on, even when we know the person may not be ready to receive it or has heard it from us before.

The legacy of faith is greater than all the money in the world, the best job, the most spectacular house, the most stimulating activity or the greatest reputation. A legacy of faith is what we build with others in our community. It’s a team sport. We’re all invited to join in. Come as you are. Bring your family and friends. Invite the neighbors. All are welcome. There’s plenty for everyone. We have a lot to share.

We know this is true because of the vision God gave to John. God reveals an amazing event: “*a huge crowd, too huge to count. Everyone*

was there - all nations and tribes, all races and languages. And they were standing, dressed in white robes and waving palm branches, standing before the Throne and the Lamb and heartily singing: Salvation to our God on the Throne! Salvation to the Lamb!”
(Revelation 7:9-12, MSG).

All our human prejudices and injustice are set aside in God’s kingdom. People from all walks of life will be gathered, regardless of skin tone, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation or other social, political, economic or cultural distinctions. What a glorious image! What a glorious day it will be when we sing of God’s victory, the blessing of eternal life. Best of all, each of us is invited to be part of that life, starting here and now.

I love the way the vision concludes. “The elder asks, ‘Who are these people?’ (v14). Did he not know? Was it a device to test John? Or was it just a way of starting a conversation, ‘Who are they?’ Turns out they are people who have found their way into the kingdom. It wasn’t a walk in the park. It took some doing, some effort, some struggle on their part.

The elder says this crowd has come through a great ordeal.

Older translations call it the tribulation. Some say it points to a specific event, having to do with the end times, the last battle, or the suffering that comes along with it. Others say that it’s the ordeal of living in uncertain times. Maybe it refers to something cataclysmic and world-encompassing, or maybe it refers to ordeals like those we read about in our newspapers or see listed in our prayer chains – ordeals of illness or infirmity, ordeals of abuse or violence or victimization, ordeals of hunger and poverty, ordeals of . . . well, you fill in the blank. There are so many ordeals and struggles, large and small, in the world. So, it may be the sum of all of them add up to the great ordeal the elder speaks of.

‘But wait,’ you say, ‘it has to be more than just survival, more than just getting through whatever the struggles are.’ And you’re right. They came through, the elder tells us, and they washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That is one little indicator that you can’t take this literally! Washing robes in blood won’t make them white. So, what does it mean? One thing I can tell you, it’s not a Halloween theme!

Blood, in the Bible, usually means life, sometimes a life of sacrifice. This group of people gathered before God are the ones who put on the life of the Lamb. Paul is always telling us to put on our faith, to put on the attributes of Christ, to put on the fruit of the Spirit. These are the ones who put on Christ, put on his life, and lived it as though it were their own. They lived it in front of any and all people, particularly those in need. They lived and worked for the benefit of others.

They are the ones who cared for you, the ones who loved you. They are the ones who cared for the people in this community, building this church. They are the ones who go out, feeding and caring for the needy in our community. They are the ones who stand for social justice, no matter who may oppose them, because it is what Jesus did, and would do. They are the ones who don’t shrink back, but share their faith, freely and openly, with everyone. They sacrifice so others can be free.

On All Saints Day, they are the ones we remember. Those who loved and cared and now are no longer here to do so. Some of them will come again when we gather. But there are many who aren’t coming home. They have left a hole in our midst. They have left tasks for others to do. They have given an example someone has to pick up. They have left caring for others needs for us to do.

In other words, it’s our time in the laundry room. We wash our robes in the blood, the life and witness and example of the Lamb, and then we put that way of living on and begin to look like and act like Jesus. We love like him. We comfort others like him. We seek justice like him. We don’t let our head rest easy like him. We don’t take our life for granted like him. We give our life for others like him. That’s the promise and that’s the hope: all that divides us, terrorizes us and wounds us will be gone. Fear, uncertainty, evil and even death will lose their control over us. The unity of the Spirit will be the unity of all people.”²

Who are these people? They are the ones our community remembers. Today, we celebrate and honor them. We have the chance to take up our cross and join them. At this moment, we stand at a crossroad, remembering the past, looking to future, living in the present with hope.

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/these-are-they/all-saints-day-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/all-saints-day-year-a-preaching-notes>

Remembering Those Who Have Died

I invite you light a candle – today or sometime this week, as you say a name or many names of those you want to remember in this space. Let the flame represent the Holy Spirit as well as the spirits of those who are still a part of us in the mystery that is eternity.

I invite you to name and remember your loved ones. Let us pray ...

“That one that I loved, O God, is now with you.
I can say that, not knowing ‘how’ or ‘where,’
but say it because it makes no sense
that so rich and full a life
would come to an abrupt end ...
except for memories.

Still, I am bereft for they are not with me.
I listen to all the clichés of my friends,
spoken to console me:
‘They are better off.’
‘They are past their pain and suffering.’
‘They are in heaven,’ whatever that means.

I listen and am not consoled.
My grief is selfish.
I want to feel their touch
and hear their voice
and see their smile.

I am confident They are with you,
and I am just as confident, O Lord,
you understand how it is with me.
I cannot help recalling times
I might have been gentler, softer, more thoughtful.
I wish I could live some hours over.
I wish I could say ‘I love you’ just one more time.
These failures I must accept.

‘Time heals all things,’ they say.
I do not believe Time does anything.
You, O God, are Healer and Helper.

You can heal me in time,
help me through the lonely days and long nights.
You can give me renewed zest for going on
and entering into life once more.

‘Thanks be to God who gives us the victory
through our Lord Jesus Christ.’

I believe that.

But right now I grieve; I hurt; I am bereft.

Thanks be to God who understands
through Jesus Christ our Lord.”³ Amen.

Matthew 5:1-12 (CEB)

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying:

“Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

“Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

“Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

“Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy.

“Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

“Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God’s children.

“Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

³ Kenneth G. Phifer, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer*, Upper Room Books, 1981, pp. 106-107

Revelation 7:9-17 (CEB)

After this I looked, and there was a great crowd that no one could number. They were from every nation, tribe, people, and language. They were standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They wore white robes and held palm branches in their hands. They cried out with a loud voice:

“Victory belongs to our God
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.”

All the angels stood in a circle around the throne, and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell facedown before the throne and worshipped God, saying,

“Amen! Blessing and glory
and wisdom and thanksgiving
and honor and power and might
be to our God forever and always. Amen.”

Then one of the elders said to me, “Who are these people wearing white robes, and where did they come from?”

I said to him, “Sir, you know.”

Then he said to me, “These people have come out of great hardship. They have washed their robes and made them white in the Lamb’s blood. This is the reason they are before God’s throne. They worship him day and night in his temple, and the one seated on the throne will shelter them. They won’t hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”