All Souls Day Sermon
St. John's Tappahannock
Rev. Nanette Woodworth
November 2, 2025
Luke 6:20-31

I am presenting a sermon in two parts today. One is about how early 20th century artist Diego Rivera captured the meaning of All Souls Day, or Dia de los Muertos, in some of his paintings. Then we will turn to today's scriptures for our gospel message and make some meaningful connections.

Copies of these paintings are on the side table in the Parish Hall and in the foyer. You may also look at the paintings on your phone as I describe them, by using the handout in the bulletin.

A brief description of Diego Rivera will provide some context. He was a very influential figure in 20th c. art. He was Mexican by birth, and traveled internationally. His paintings and murals capture the soul of the people of Mexico, and the struggles of farm and factory workers, and people of poverty in general.

Significant works can be found in Mexico City at the National Palace, and the Palacio de Bellas Artes, and the Museo Mural Diego Rivera. His works are also at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

The mural Dia.de.los.Muertos at first may give us a sense of the macabre. The scene is a fantastic display of a street celebration, replete with calvaros, (skeletal figures playing guitars, skulls with hats representing different walks of life). The partying public in front of the stage embodies the celebration of life equated with this city fiesta. This traditional celebration in Hispanic culture is a living symbol of their integrated view of the cycle of life and death.

Gabriel Garcia says that Dia.de.los.Muertos is above all a family reunion, the people of God, both here and beyond, encouraging each other to persevere, until the hope of the resurrection is filled. We can resonate with the recognition that death is not an end, but a beginning of eternal life in a place of

love and harmony. 1 They still care about us and we still care about them. The veil between us is very thin.

Another Diego Rivera painting captures a glimpse of heaven, called Friday.of. Sorrows.on.the.Canal.of.Santa.Anita.(1923-4). Because the painting depicts a procession on Good Friday, it is relevant to All Souls Day. For just as we weep on Good Friday for our Saviour and his sacrifice on the cross for our salvation, we rise with him of Easter Sunday into the joy of the resurrection.

In this painting we see boats filled with flowers floating slowly on the river, a ritual marked with solemnity. Flowers braid the procession, especially calla lilies. In Diego Rivera's art, the calla lily symbolizes both the beauty of Mexican culture and the suffering of its people, and represents the abundance of life alongside the death of indigenous cultures, and the hardship of the laborer.

In Friday.of.Sorrows we also notice that the children are idealized, and are chubby and healthy, in contrast to the reality of hunger, disease and poverty of the 1920's in Mexico. The abundance of corn, a staple in their diet, is a symbol of God's abundant creation and of their homeland.

Contained in this image of the procession of this holy day are expectations for fullness of life now, emerging outside the bounds of time from the distant focal point and continuing forward into eternity. This is a beautiful scene of the heavenly banquet, where all is restored. It is also Diego's hope for those who struggle in this life.

I have included two calla lily paintings as well. They represent one of Rivera's favorite subjects and his affection for underclass people, and especially in these paintings, the carriers and vendors of flowers of Mexico.

The flowers' purity can be contrasted with the harsh realities of the laborers' lives, creating a powerful juxtaposition of beauty and struggle. In both The. Flower.Vendor and The Flower.Carrier.paintings, a peasant worker is assisted by another individual because the flowers are so heavy, a female peasant in the first and a male in the second. They are symbols of the greater cause of humble persons, and the aim of the Mexican painter is to elevate their status,

bringing them dignity and pride. I believe that Rivera is the one pictured in The. Flower.Vendor helping to both bear the heavy burden of the worker and by highlighting the struggle for justice to the world community in his artwork.

Diego Rivera was a serious advocate for the poor yet also knew how to negotiate his way in the world of art patronage. He was financially supported by American patrons like Dwight W. Morrow and Edsel Ford and the Rockefellers and attained celebrity status in the US. These include massive projects like the Detroit Industry Murals (1937) and the MOMA exhibit in 1931. He also received funding from the Mexican government for his early work and a donation from the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), (a New Deal program). For a communist modern artist from Mexico to work closely with American capitalists at the highest level of influence to heighten awareness of needs of the poor and marginalized and the rights of laborers was quite astonishing.

But to be clear, D. Rivera pushed the envelope when he included Russian Revolutionary Vladimir Lenin in the mural Man.at.the.Crossroads. This project was commissioned by the Rockefellers and installed at the Rockefeller Center in NYC. Once they saw that Lenin was included, the Rockefellers tore it down, since as capitalists they opposed the inclusion of a communist leader whose politics they did not embrace. Rivera ended up repainting it in Mexico. Their common ground was the empowerment of those who have the least.

Part II

Luke 6:20-31

This is a good segway to the second half today's message, where we consider the Beatitudes, or the Sermon on the Mount, and the axiom, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' By listing the blessings and woes, Luke was not interested in dividing people into haves and have nots. The language of this passage suggests that while most who heard Jesus' sermon on the mount were probably not wealthy, some listeners were. So all were invited to "becoming poor" in the sense of being open to discipleship and its

expectations. In other words, blessed are the poor in Luke is interpreted as – Blessed are those who identify with the issues of poverty, and strive to build God's kingdom on earth by taking responsibility for those who have the least to the extent that they can. Specifically, those with means are directed to imitate our generous God by lending money, forgiving debt, and giving generously to those inside and outside the community. 2

In doing so, those who respond to the invitation to generosity were not to fall into the reciprocity ethic, i.e., to expect those who benefit from their generosity to pay back the favor at some future date. However perhaps those who were given means to advocate for themselves and succeed in moving out of poverty into personal agency will be motivated to 'pay it forward' out of a natural desire to do the same for others.

This is not unlike the reformation idea that our good works come not out of an expectation from God to be good so that we deserve and earn rewards in heaven, but we do good works simply out of a loving response of gratitude for all that God has done for us.

On All Saints Day we remember those who, like Jesus, empathized with those who struggled so much that they took on a life of poverty. For example, 12th c. St. Francis, and modern-day Dorothy Day whose birthday we celebrate this week. But most of us are not called to embrace poverty in this extreme way.

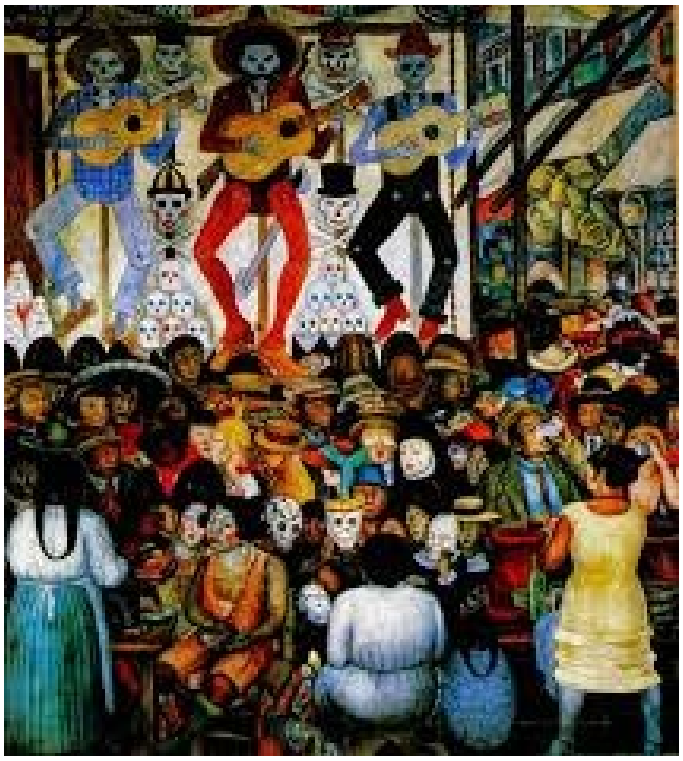
Might we find ways within our own occupations and interests to do what Diego Rivera did – use his skill to speak truth to power, and highlight the economic gaps in society which discriminate most against the poor, a prevalent theme throughout his murals and paintings.

While we are called to share in ways that make a difference in the lives of those who have the least, what that looks like for each of us is personal, and we should not engage in judging one another. As they say, »Be.kind.to. everyone?we.do.not.know.what.burdens.they.are.carrying¡‹ .(theologian Ian McClaren) All to say we each live complicated lives that are full of contradictions. Let us each pray to our loving God for wisdom about how we

can dig down deeper in order to make life a little easier for those who are not born into the advantages which many of us here made our beginnings.

And as for loving our enemies and the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you - Jesus loved his enemies and died for us all, but he also spoke out against what his enemies were doing that was unjust. And he died on the cross for walking the talk. So within reason, yes, let's try to understand the life story of someone who is not in agreement with us, and try to find common ground and avoid angry responses and violence. And let's pray for our enemies that they might turn their hearts to God, like one of the two criminals on either side of Jesus at the crucifixion. If we don't stand up to those who abuse power and show no compassion for those who have the least, then there is not much hope for the future.

So as theologian Matthew Myer Boulten of Harvard Divinity School writes, "True love acts to end abuse [at all levels of society] — primarily for the sake of the abused but also for the sake of the abusers, who harm themselves as well as their victim(s). Thus [...] holding abusers accountable is not only consistent with "loving our enemies" — it is an expression of it. How then shall we live? [Less by a Golden Rule, and more by a Golden Love:] By a love "expecting nothing in return," a love beyond fairness, beyond exchange; an extravagant love of grace and mercy; the love we were born for, children of the Most High (Luke 6:35)." 2 Amen



Above: Dia.de.los.Muertos 1924 Below: Friday.of.Sorrows.(7❺89_0)

Above: Vendedora.de.Flores 1942 Below: Cargedor.de.Flores.1935 3

Resources

1. Empereur, James and Fernandez, Eduardo; La Vida Sacra, Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology; Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; New York; 2006
2. Raymond E. Brown of Union Theological Seminary, NYC; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. (emeritus) of Catholic University of America Washington, DC; Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (emeritus) of The Divinity School of Duke University, Durhan, NC; Editors; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; Prentice Hall; Upper Saddle Brook, NJ 07458; p. 710
3. Boulten, Matthew Myers; Saltproject Blog for 11.2.25; www.saltproject.org
4. Diego Rivera artwork; google images

To view the paintings during the sermon on your cell phone:

Go to Google Images

Type the following as these paintings are mentioned.

1. Dia.de.los.Muertos by Diego Rivera
2. Friday.of.Sorrows.by Diego Rivera
3. Vendor.of.Flowers by Diego Rivera
4. Carrier of Flowers.by Diego Rivera

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