

God's Holy Ones
November 6, 2022 (All Saints C)
Luke 6:20-31

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Then (Jesus) looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.

[21] "Blessed are you who are hungry now,

for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now,

for you will laugh.

[22] "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. [23] Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,

for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets

[24] "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

[25] "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

[26] "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

[27] "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

[28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. [29] 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. [30] Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. [31] Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Prayer For all the saints, who from their labors rest, we give you thanks this day, O God. For all those dear people who loved us, who told us stories of Jesus, who lived the faith before us and exemplified the path of discipleship, we give thanks. Remembrance of the saints and their witness reminds us that we are not here by our own efforts. Rather, we are here in your church by their gifts and grace. Lord, help us so to live that others might profit by our example. Give us grace to live faithfully in our time and place, to live the Christian life in such a way that others might see our lives and want to follow you because they see some of your light reflected in us. Amen.

Dear Fellow saints in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord, Jesus Christ.

This Sunday is All Saints Sunday, a Sunday when traditionally we remember all those who have died in the faith and now serve their Lord in the Church Triumphant, that is the church in heaven. For that reason it might come as a bit of a surprise that I addressed each of you as “fellow saints in Christ.” The definition I use to explain what a saint is, is one I learned in Elementary Release Time classes many years ago: “A saint is anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior”. In the Apostle’s Creed we confess that we believe in “the Communion of Saints.” Included in this Communion of Saints, are apostles and other martyrs of the early church; and it includes, we presume, other pillars of the faith throughout the history of the church like St. Augustine, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther King

Jr. , and Mother Teresa. It also includes those who nurtured each one of us in the faith including for many of us, parents and grandparents, pastors, and Sunday school teachers. And it includes those who today continue to keep the faith alive, and that includes each one of you, I'm sure or we wouldn't see you gathering here each week to worship our Savior.

Because our faith is a living faith, the Communion of Saints includes both those who have passed on to their eternal reward or the "the church triumphant" as well as those who continue in the struggle here on earth, or "the church militant". The Communion of Saints are all the members of the church, in every age those who are with us today and those departed; all these make up what St. Paul calls, in today's second reading from Ephesians, the body of Christ, all who "live in hope."

All Saints Sunday is not on the same level of importance in the church year as Christmas, Easter or Pentecost.... but that doesn't mean that "All Saints Sunday" is "no big deal." It's more than a kind of "Memorial Day in November"—more than a sentimental journey recalling loved ones whom we still miss. Rather, All Saints Sunday is about two things that really, truly do matter.

First we need to hear—the Easter good news: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! And on this day we not only need that message but also the message that because we have been baptized into Jesus' death and have been buried with him so too, as Jesus has been raised from the dead, we also have the promise of a resurrection like his. The Resurrection is not just something we make a big fuss over for a few weeks in March, April and May. On this early November day we are reminded that the Resurrection of our

Lord is an every Sunday of the church year celebration. Every Sunday is a commemoration of the great Easter event, the Resurrection of our Lord.

It's true, — especially at times when hope is harder to maintain, as daylight savings time ends and the length of our days are getting shorter, when the chill in the air produces a corresponding chill in our souls, All Saints Sunday comes around, whispering in our ears: "It's still true, even now: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again! And I think that's why the Beatitudes are presented as our gospel reading for All Saints Sunday, because what are the Beatitudes if they are not a message of hope?

Saints come in many varieties, but in our gospel for today Jesus focuses on certain kinds of saints who received much of his attention in his ministry: the destitute, the hungry, the mournful, and the despised and rejected. These people, Jesus proclaims, are "blessed," The Greek word that gets translated in our New Revised Standard Version as "blessed" is "makarios." Some contemporary translations of the New Testament substitute the word "happy" for "blessed" presumably because "blessed" is too churchy a word and not commonly used very much in everyday conversation. But New Testament scholar Matt Skinner suggests that while "blessed" might be too "churchy," "happy" is a word that has grown "too small" in common usage. He suggests that more appropriate words to translate "makarios" might be "unburdened" or "satisfied." Based on my reading, I might also suggest "contented" or "at peace" as suitable substitutions.

Jesus also addressed people who are the opposite of the first groups: the wealthy, the fully indulged, the laughing, and the acclaimed. To all of these he cries out,

“Woe!” Skinner feels that there are also more suitable translations for the Greek word that gets translated into English as “woe.” The Greek word does not mean “cursed” or “unhappy” and certainly not “damned”. Skinner prefers using the word, “yikes!” In Eugene Peterson’s contemporary translation of the New Testament, he uses the phrase, “It’s trouble ahead...” instead of “woe.” But the word “woe” is not really a warning, like “watch out”. Perhaps for those with Norwegian backgrounds like myself, I might suggest as a substitute of, “Uffda” It seem to serve pretty much the same function as “woe”. (They both portend bad news without the tone of warning.)

We do need to take these contrasts that Jesus speaks of here seriously but not necessarily as future consequences of our current situation. If the reign of God “is among you” already, even now, as Jesus pronounces a little later in Luke’s gospel, (Luke 17:21) then the blessed and woe statements signal something for people to experience in the present.

Jesus sees the world through glasses that distort the conventional values everyone else sees. His perspective turns everything upside-down, like Mary’s song of joy, “The Magnificat” did: “He has shown strength with his arms; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:46-55). Things operate differently in the reign of God, as they are made apparent in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ work and message actively benefit the disadvantaged and not the privileged (cf. Luke 4:16-19; 5:30-32).

As Rev. Gordon Straw, who served as the director of Native American ministries of the ELCA, wrote, “The Beatitudes of Jesus are a radical departure from a

commonsense understanding of the world. The Beatitudes are 'sacred paradoxes' ...Rev. Straw said, "They turn the world upside down. They are a reversal of the human notion of blessedness, and they stand against the popular idea of who the truly blessed are."

The Beatitudes have long been an inspiration for moral and ethical living but as the late Pastor Arland Fiske wrote, We need to be careful that we don't treat the Beatitudes as though they were "a set of new commandments". We should not interpret them as a reward for our behavior. Fiske suggested that the Beatitudes exhibit the "fruits of the Spirit" that Paul wrote about in Galatians (5:22-23). "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

The Beatitudes express God's love for those who human society has neglected or disregarded. The poor are not blessed because they are impoverished. The hungry are not blessed because they have been put on an involuntary fast. The defamed and reviled are not blessed because of their poor treatment. Jesus calls them blessed. Why? Simply because God always reserves God's sharpest attention for those who are in need, those left behind by the powers that be, those left out of the lavish bounty of the world's produce. God is always on the side of the underdog. Poverty, hunger, mourning, hatred, exclusion, revilement and defamation –these things certainly don't seem like blessings!

But Jesus is convinced that they are. And most shocking of all, Jesus says that these are the sorts of people to whom the Kingdom of God is entrusted. Of course, some will raise their hands in objection and say, "We can't possibly entrust the Kingdom

of God to a bunch of poor folks. They don't know the first thing about business or what it takes to run a kingdom." Others might say, "The Kingdom of God is just a fancy term tossed around by theologians. It isn't possible on Earth. There's just too much violence and oppression and chaos."

Or worst of all, some will hear the words of Jesus and say, "See there? Jesus will take care of the poor and the hungry and the sorrowful and the hated in heaven. Who am I to get in the way of God's will?"

The blessedness of the Beatitudes comes not as a reward for things done well; they are not even limited to those who follow Jesus. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "blessed are the poor who follow me." He says, "blessed are the poor" (period). Blessedness is the pure and radical love that God shows for his creation.

The key to unlocking the mystery of these upside down, inside out Beatitudes is the radical love of God. The Beatitudes are radical because love is the very root of God's existence. "God is love," we are told in I John 4:8. God's relationship to his creation is expressed in love. His very first act of love was creation itself. And when humans fell into sin God sent Moses and the prophets to help lead people away from sin. Finally, God sent the fullest expression of his love, Jesus Christ, in order to redeem creation, to resurrect a fallen world. Jesus was not simply a good man; he was and is love in earthly form. Jesus' Beatitudes are nothing less than God's expression of love for creation. That love never changes.... It never ends. In the apostle Paul's words in Romans 8 (v.35, 36-39) "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? 37 No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced

that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Or as the Hebrew scriptures repeatedly remind us, "God's steadfast love and tender mercy last forever." AMEN

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