

Matthew 5:1-23

If you are wearing red, please stand. If you are wearing black, please stand. Please stand if you are wearing blue, brown, orange, yellow, pink, white, grey, or any color I may have missed. Now look around.... All of you are saints. You can sit back down.

Today is All Saints Day, the day we celebrate not only the saints who have gone before us, but the saints who we are among now. In the Lutheran tradition saint simply means "baptized child of God." So each and every one of us is being celebrated today because we all claim the name of "saint". It's a great time to give thanks, to give thanks to God for our church building and our congregation, and for those who have modeled what it means to be a Christ follower.

In our gospel reading this morning we heard about those saints who are blessed... the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake. When you hear that list do you hear anyone who seems as though they are blessed? I don't think so. I found out in my studies this week that in this context the word "blessed" means to be esteemed, or to be held in a place of honor. This list of people still doesn't seem to fit into the description. That is because Jesus turns the world upside down. When he describes the blessings, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven, they will be comforted, they will inherit the earth, they will be filled, they will receive mercy, they will see God, they will be called children of God, theirs is the kingdom of heaven" these blessings sound like the things we all want. Yet it seems as though Jesus is saying that those whom seem to be far from the blessing are the ones who are blessed. What Jesus is really saying is blessed are those who realize they have nothing and everything comes from God. Who among us is not in need of God? There is no way we can receive these blessings by anything we do for ourselves, we cannot accomplish any of this on our own, they are all gifts from God.

This passage, commonly known as the beatitudes, comes from Jesus' sermon on the mount which he delivered shortly after he began his earthly ministry. He's describing to us what the "reign of heaven" is all about. If his disciples and those who are on the hillside are expecting to hear how they can attain a state of blessedness, how they can enter into the kingdom of heaven, they are surprised. Looking around the world, then and now, it's easy to conclude that the "blessed" are the rich, happy, strong, satisfied, ruthless, deceptive, aggressive, safe, and well-liked — and yet here's Jesus, saying that despite appearances, the truly "blessed" are actually the poor, mourning, gentle, hungry, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted, and reviled. How frustrating this is to someone who's searching for a way to attain membership in the kingdom.

This list of beatitudes tells us who is truly blessed, it isn't a set of instructions. Jesus is not recommending those who hear his words go to create a reason to mourn, or to be persecuted. He is consoling those who are mourning and those who have been persecuted, or those who through outside forces find themselves in one of these situations. Remember, the crowds around Jesus are mainly those who are sick and afflicted, and those who care for them. He's telling them, the world may not think of you as honorable, but God does. Jesus came to bring a new set of standards, one where everyone is of value. Jesus is reminding people that they, and this "they" includes us, have a responsibility to care for all persons, without regard to their social stature or their life circumstances.

We're fairly good at doing this here. We put food in the little pantry out by the street. We make quilts and give them to people in need, both here in town and outside of our country. We served a meal of sloppy joes and pasta salad to hungry people at Holy Trinity Lutheran. We collected coats for children in need. We handed out candy to children in the neighborhood, giving them a warm break. We are gathering boxes of stuffing mix for Thanksgiving bags to be handed out by the West Millcreek Food Pantry. In a few weeks we will be decorating a Christmas tree with hats, scarves and gloves to give to

children in need. We pack bags of necessities for the shelter. You as a congregation have welcomed Bill and I into a loving space. You can probably think of things I have forgotten. But how are we bringing people to Christ? How are we helping people build a relationship with Jesus? One of the slogans from the organization Koinonia, a national ecumenical group created to bring people closer to Christ, is "Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ." How are we at doing that? I was once told that anything we learn should be shared with others so they too can grow. I believe it is the same with following Jesus. The more we learn about Jesus, the more we should be willing to share Jesus with others. If the people who brought us to Jesus hadn't shared their knowledge of Jesus, how would we be here?

Would we be a baptized child of God, a saint? You may not feel like what you would call a "saint"... someone who lives without sin, but because we are baptized children of God we are saints. We are already what we crave to be. We are saved from our sin by the grace of God because of God's love for us through Jesus the Christ. We experience this love through the words and actions of others, and also through our words and actions towards others. Each and every one of us here is a member of the communion of saints, those people who, in our reading from Revelation this morning are standing in white robes. When we think of the persons standing before God, we usually think about the 144,000, those who are mentioned in the verses just before this morning's reading. They are specifically named as from the 12 tribes of Israel. Next John, the writer of the book of Revelation moves on to the great multitude, those who are standing in front of the throne, robed in white, waving palm branches, declaring "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Who are these who are robed in white, and where have they come from? From the great ordeal. The great ordeal... is it the time of persecution the people whom John is addressing are living in? It is a time of harsh Roman rule where Christians are being sacrificed in the arenas. Is it those who have come out of the Babylonian exile, those who were forced from their homes to work for the Assyrians and then the Babylonians? They returned to their homeland to find it destroyed. Certainly they went through a great ordeal.

Or could it mean the great ordeal of life? If we try to make the ordeal just one thing we miss too much. Life is an ordeal. We all go through times of difficulties. Maybe it's the single mom whose children are causing her trouble. Maybe it's the man who has always been faithful to his wife and she left him for another person. Maybe it's the elderly person who lives on a shoestring budget and has just been scammed out of all the money they had. Or maybe it's the person who's loved has died. Most all of us have experienced a time of sorrow so great that we have been able to do nothing but lean upon God. It is this God for whom we have waited.

Today is the festival day when we celebrate that death does not separate us from those we love. We celebrate that even in death our basic needs will be fulfilled. There is no more hunger or thirst, there is no scorching heat. God will wipe away every tear. And the Lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd who will guide us. There is a sense of comfort knowing that our sins have been wiped away, and it is for these reasons that we are worshipping God.

Malcolm Guite in his sonnet "A Last Beatitude" (Sounding the Seasons, Canterbury Press), tells us God notices and blesses even those who are not noticed on earth:

A Last Beatitude

And blessed are the ones we overlook;
The faithful servers on the coffee rota,
The ones who hold no candle, bell or book
But keep the books and tally up the quota,
The gentle souls who come to 'do the flowers',

The quiet ones who organise the fete,
Church sitters who give up their weekday hours,
Doorkeepers who may open heaven's gate.
God knows the depths that often go unspoken
Amongst the shy, the quiet, and the kind,
Or the slow healing of a heart long broken
Placing each flower so for a year's mind.
Invisible on earth, without a voice,
In heaven their angels glory and rejoice.

This morning we celebrate all who are a part of the communion of saints.
All glory be to God.