

Many Blessings

Nov. 6, 2012, All Saints Day

Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 7:9-17

As I read the Beatitudes this week preparing for this message, I thought of many people I know now and people I have known in the past. As we celebrate All Saints Day, this seems very appropriate----to think of the saints in our lives who have embodied the characteristics that Jesus is speaking of----people who are pure in heart, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. All of them blessed by God for being who they are.

This morning I want to look more deeply at the Beatitudes.

As a preface to the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with the Beatitudes, Matthew began his account of the Gospel by saying,

“ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.”

This is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He has been baptized and tempted by the devil, and then travelled around Galilee and Syria, healing everyone he meets. He never asked anyone any questions, as far as we know. He never tested anyone or required them to repent or confess their faith that he was the Son of God.

He just healed everyone who needed healing.

As a result, a huge crowd was following him. He saw them and went up the mountain and sat down. And then he began to teach them, and what he said to this diverse, almost random, crowd was counter-cultural and surprising. Blessings then, as now, were thought to be for the righteous, the rich, the religious. But Jesus said something completely different.

He began, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The poor in spirit---those who know that without God's help, they are nothing. Those who rely completely on God for everything. In direct contradiction to those who say, "God helps those who help themselves," which, by the way, is not anywhere in the Bible.

So what's the blessing for these poor, helpless, humble people? Theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.

Not---they will someday gain the kingdom of heaven, but present tense---theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.

How can this be? Because the kingdom of heaven is where people know that God is everything, and God is all that the poor in spirit have, all that they look to for hope and help and survival.

On this All Saints Day, I ask you this----

In the course of your life, who have you known, or who do you know, who was or is poor in spirit? Who puts their whole trust in God? Who depends on God alone and gives God all the glory for everything good that has happened in their lives?

I'm going to give you a moment to think about that, and to thank God for that person in your life.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

Jesus continues----

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Conventional wisdom tells us that those who mourn are not blessed, that they are deprived, stricken. Some people would even tell you that people who are mourning are being somehow punished for their sins or some kind of wrong-doing.

But Jesus says that those who mourn are blessed, that they will be comforted. The grief will not continue forever. God will help them. God will dry their tears and be with them.

Who do you know who is mourning? Who has been hit with loss? This is not going to be someone who has passed, but someone who is still living, maybe in this room or maybe at work or in your family or in your neighborhood. Name that person in your heart and thank God for the comfort that person is receiving from God. Remember that those who mourn are blessed by God.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Now, in my mind, this is one of the most countercultural statements I have ever heard! Meek people getting anything?? When we think of meek

people we usually think of passive people being happy however they manage to scrape by.

We think of 98-pound weaklings getting sand kicked in their faces by bullies. We certainly don't think of someone who is meek ending up inheriting the whole world!

This is a very different idea indeed!

And it takes me back to the book of Genesis, where God entrusted the care of all of creation to people, to Adam and Eve, who were pleased to walk in the garden with God and name the animals and live in harmony with creation. Maybe this is what being meek means----to be gentle on the earth and walk humbly with God.

And then Adam and Eve messed up. They gave in to temptation to know good and evil and try to be like God---not such a meek thing to do. And they lost their place in creation. God kicked them out of the garden of Eden. They no longer inherited God's Kingdom.

So who do you know, with us or with God, who is meek? Who does not abuse what God has created. Who does not try to be like God but instead walks humbly with God, listening for God's voice and being obedient to it.

Think about who in your life is meek and thank God for the gift of that person in your life.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

Next, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Those who dream of God's righteousness being pervasive, who have a passion for working to bring about God's righteousness, God's plan for all people, will see that happen.

They will get to a time and place where what God desires for creation will be reality. Their hopes and prayers will be answered. Maybe it will only be in a small way, or maybe it will be universal, but their hunger and thirst will not be for nothing.

What saint have you known, what saint do you know today who hunger and thirsts for righteousness---who works passionately for causes that help the poor or the oppressed or the marginalized?

Who stands up for others? Who speaks up for those who have no voice?

Name those people in your hearts, and thank God for them.
Remember that their efforts will not be for nothing---they will see
righteousness prevail. That is God's blessing for them!

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

Does God do that? Evidently. Those who are not merciful will not receive mercy. Those who are merciful, who pay it forward, so to speak, will receive God's mercy for themselves.

Who in your life is merciful? Who is a forgiving, kind person who has shown God's grace to others? Who do you think of who embodies unconditional love?

Thank God for that person, or those people. God has blessed them, and God has blessed us with their presence in our lives.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

Jesus continues, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Seeing God---amazing to think about. This was a surprising thought to people. Most people, then and now, believe that no one can see God and live. But I don't think this blessing is talking about in the sweet bye and bye. I think it's talking about in this earthly life.

Just as Moses went up the mountain and came down with a shining face from seeing God, the pure in heart will see God. Pure in heart means

having nothing in your heart but a desire for God. That desire will be filled. That's the blessing God gives to the pure in heart.

The pure in heart see God in other people, in nature, in things that happen around them. There is no question in their heart, no ulterior motives, no suspicions---just a pure desire for God.

Name someone in your life who desires God above everything else, who sees with the eyes of Christ.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

And then Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

God told us many times how to respond to violence. We are to turn the other cheek, to repay evil with good, to go the extra mile.

A couple of years after this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed us clearly how to respond to evil and violence----not by being passive or weak, but by maintaining self-control and not letting violence take his life, but by voluntarily giving up his life.

God does not retaliate against violence with more violence. God's way is peace. Jesus Christ is called the Prince of Peace, who doesn't just teach peace, but is peace himself.

So those who are peacemakers, who work for peace, who live out the way of peace, are called---they are known as children of God.

All of us are children of God, but those of us who are peacemakers are recognized by other people as children of God.

Name a peacemaker in your life, and be grateful that you have known them.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

The final beatitude is "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

These days, in this country, not many of us experience persecution, but there is some level of animosity in some quarters against Christians, and there is persecution against Christians in very real ways in some other countries.

Maybe you know someone who has been the target of being reviled or persecuted simply for believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Maybe you know someone who stands up for what they believe and is made fun of or discriminated against as a result.

Name that person in your heart, and be grateful to know such a hero.

God, we thank you for the saints you have brought into our lives.

And now picture all of those people you have named in your heart--- picture them standing all together, dressed in white, surrounding the throne of God.

And now add to that picture even more people. People from every nation and tribe, people who speak different languages, all dressed in white and crying out praises to God. Add to that the angels—all the heavenly host---praising God and Jesus Christ with every breath.

And you have our passage from the Book of Revelation, which is at the end of time, but it is also now! It is all of these other people and it is also us!

It is the Kingdom of Heaven, which is already near, already among us, already within us!

People we have known, people we still know, people we have heard stories about, people who lived years ago, and people yet to be born---all in holy communion with God and Christ and each other and us, singing praises and worshipping the one, true God and our risen savior.

This is the message of All Saints Day.

As we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, let us be aware of all the saints who surround us, both those who have gone before us, and those who still stand among us.

Amen and amen.