

Sermon for All Saints 2008

What are your thoughts about these Beatitudes that we have in both Matthew and Luke?

Do we consider ourselves meek? Are we the blessed peacemakers? Do we believe ourselves to be the ones who thirst for righteousness? Or, perhaps do we think of ourselves as the poor in spirit or the pure in heart?

I wonder. How do we see these Beatitudes of Jesus? Do we understand them to be an ordering, an attempt to put people who exhibit a certain tendency to be poor in spirit or have a predisposition to be merciful into understandable categories?

That would make sense to our minds. We could order the Church that way. We like order. We like structure. Even a right-brained person such as me likes to have things all in their place.

Wouldn't it be nice to know the merciful sit in pews 11-20? That the poor in spirit sit in pews 21-30, and the peacemakers sit behind them.

What about 1-10? They would hold those who suffered persecution on account of Jesus and they would sit up front. Or, as up front as people do in church.

What about the mourners? They could sit somewhere in the middle. And the meek? Where else? In the back of course. Or better in the Undercroft, or somewhere, anywhere, suitably meek.

Does anyone see a problem with all that? It seems to make sense. We could argue that each of these groups of people make up the Church. Each of these groups make up the body of Christ.

We have meek cells, and a hungry righteous heart, and a merciful conscience, all parts of the body.

I wonder, is that how we see the beatitudes? As a laundry list from Jesus of who is blessed? So orderly, so organized, so manageable. We can choose our one favorite way to be and pitch in doing our part for God's Kingdom.

I thought this way for a long time. Perhaps you did or do. We can look over one of these blessed ways to live and do it. But where does that get us?

Which one do we like? Poor in spirit sounds good. They get the Kingdom of Heaven, I could live with that. Although I am not so sure about what poor in spirit means. Mourn? No, not for me-who wants to do that? We would want to avoid that if possible.

Meek? No thanks, living a lifetime of meekness just to inherit the earth does not seem worth it.

Being righteous or merciful seems better, although the hungry part needs more definition. Merciful sounds good, I'll feel great about myself. But if I live a lifetime of being merciful shouldn't I get something more than mercy?

Pure in heart sounds admirable. But the persecution and being reviled? I don't know. Won't I be better off if everyone liked me? Couldn't I spread the Gospel better if people weren't trying to kill me?

Have you thought this way? Are you thinking it now? It just seems so logical that way.

For a very short time I was a Cub Scout. Why I did not continue in that group is a story for another time.

But I was in long enough to take part in the pinewood derby.

You may recall that that event was where the contestants are supposed to do their own work but most of the fathers help too much. Mine did.

There is a story of one such pinewood derby where a youngster with no dad showed up with a racer he had obviously made with his own unskilled hands.

The contest pitted boys in pairs, one against another, with the winner advancing to the next round in a series of eliminations.

Somehow this one kid's car won again and again, until, defying all odds, he was in the finals against another scout with a slick-looking, well-made racer.

Before the championship race, the boy asked the director to wait a moment so he could pray.

The crowd, now enthralled by the unlikely story unfolding before them, stood in silence, loving the boy and secretly praying with him that he might win; he seemed so deserving.

After the boy won the race and was given a trophy, the director said, "Well, I guess it is a good thing you prayed, so you could win."

"Oh, no!" the boy protested, horrified to have been misunderstood. "I didn't pray to win. That would have been wrong. The other scout had as much right to win as I did. I couldn't pray that God would make him lose. I just prayed that God would help me keep from crying if I lost."

Maybe we should not think of these Beatitudes as separate distinct cogs or wheels in this thing we call Church. Maybe we should not see the successful church, the "together parish" the complete community as having those meek sitting down in the Undercroft. Or the peacemakers in rows 42 -51.

The story I just told you was a story about a saint. Nameless, unknown, and probably innocent of his sainthood, but a saint nonetheless.

To confirm his canonization, I point to the way he put together simply, humbly, and completely, those parts of our humanity that Jesus lifts up as blessedness.

The blessedness of seeing the kingdom of heaven beyond our poor spirituality.

The blessedness of allowing ourselves comfort in times of mourning.
The blessedness of recognizing our inheritance because of our meekness.
The blessedness of trusting in fulfillment of our hunger and the thirst for righteousness is quenched.
The blessedness of receiving mercy for the things we have done by being merciful to others.
The blessedness that in seeing God here and now today we may purify our hearts.
The blessedness in understanding that as children of God we can bring peace to the world.
The blessedness that we have access to the kingdom of heaven giving us the strength to act for righteousness in our world despite what the world might say. Or do.
The blessedness that the name of Jesus means something to us and the world. That the invocation of God does something to and for us and the world when we speak it, name it and ultimately claim it.

And the blessedness to pray that we be given the strength not to cry but instead to rejoice and be glad, for God is with us. And that holds more than winning anything here on earth.

Yes, all of that can be seen in the story about that young man. All of that can be seen when we consider the saints we remember today.

The listing that Jesus puts out for his followers are not prescriptions of how to be a particular Christian.

Instead these conditions speak to the reality that we have either experienced what those conditions mean because we have lived them...or we have, through our knowledge of Jesus Christ recognized the opportunity for us to embrace them and change our lives.

The other day my youngest housemate and my four legged housemate and I went for a walk, we shuffled and ambled our way through the leaves scattered on the sidewalks and ground. There were still traces of reds and yellows, and some orange in those leaves piled up. Mostly they were brown.

Up in the trees the scene was better. There the reds were more vibrant, the yellows oranges and even the still green leaves all looked beautiful.

And I had this image about saints. And the meanings of blessedness that Jesus spoke about to the disciples, his followers. And also about us sitting here or there or anywhere this morning. And the image is this.

On a day like today, here on the second of November, on a Sunday, we take time to stop and look at the trees. We look like at the colors and the glory, really of God's creation all around us. With the crisp air, the elegant blue of the sky we can be easily mesmerized at the beauty of it all. I know I am.

This day in the Church is like that.

We stop mesmerized by the remembrance of saints. Both throughout world history... and our own history here in this parish, beginning with Philander Chase but continuing on.

We stop mesmerized by the words of Jesus lifting up ways of being that we again I note, too often recoil from. We stop mesmerized by the power of taking communion with others, our brothers and sisters.

We stop mesmerized looking and seeing however, a moment in time. We see the Church, the tree of Life, the body of Christ and creation, glorious, living and true, but only at a moment in time.

And as wonderful and tempting it may be to stop and stare forever, as tempting and as purposeful it may be to do all that we can to preserve it, it all has to move on.

Because this beautiful season, like the lives of the saints and the story of God moves on. The story of our own lives and this parish moves on.

The leaves continue to fall. Those we call saints pass on. We forget how Jesus' words are part of a whole story and we can only recall bits that we try to use in piecing our lives into something whole.

The Church is not always something so glorious. And we long for the blessedness we were promised.

Trees become bare. Darkness sets in and the days turn cold. It is easy to focus then on what has gone on before. To remember the full trees, the good days, when searching for blessedness was something we could easily put off.

Well, now we realize we cannot. We need to look for the blessedness of our lives as did that boy who prayed that he would not cry but instead that he would be glad.

How are we going to do this? By whistling in the dark? Fearfully? By accommodating ourselves and our faith with the "reality of the way things are"?

Or, Boldly? Triumphantly? Claiming victory before we might lose and excluding that reality so that we need not challenge ourselves.

Or, finally do we seek and find our blessedness in what God has given us and expects us to build on? By trusting in the God who celebrates and sees as strength what the world sees as weakness.

We are a strong people. We can do what God expects of us and, frankly what the world hopes from us. And we can begin today by doing the opposite of what is happening outside our doors.

By putting leaves full of color on that tree standing there, remembering our blessedness and our thanksgivings. While outside they fall off.

By tending to this Church so that everyone can be fulfilled. By embracing the future so that we are ready to welcome others. By believing in ourselves and our God when challenges come before us.

By being the saints that we are called to be in honor of those who have gone before, but also and just as importantly, with love for those who will come tomorrow and next week and next year, and a decade from now.

By building with our own hands a thing worthy to put against the slickest fanciest shiniest thing the world has to offer.

For us to follow Jesus by living out the Beatitudes in our lives is to work to bring the kingdom of God here among us. That is what our stewardship of this place and this world means.

Take a moment to consider that. I spoke a moment ago of us trying to order these Beatitudes so that they will fit comfortably into our lives.

But consider this also, there is another ordering going on here. That is of God working to re-order our lives and this world so that the meek will inherit the earth.

So that those who mourn for the world as it is will be comforted. So that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.

God in the person of Jesus Christ tells us, in plain words, how he wants to use us to bring all this to happen. And we as followers of Christ know how our own lives have been reordered to serve God.

Can we do it? Can you? Can I? Yes, we can. I know we can. I know we can because God would not ask us any more than we can handle. Even when it seems he does.

It is ironic that the most beautiful part of the growing season comes right at the end. And it is ironic that we are willing to suspend our faith to cling to that beauty and glory.

It is ironic that the recognition of saints all too often comes after they are gone.

It is ironic that a makeshift car built with faith and understanding of something we call love can best what the world has to offer.

It is ironic that the glory of Christ was revealed when he seemed to die.

Life is full of irony. And the Beatitudes speak to that.

But life is also full of the goodness of God. And the purpose of God. And the love of God for us.

In each instance I just named, life happens, growth happens, and God's goodness, and God's purpose and God's love is made known. And there is blessedness.

You and I, us modern day saints, by being here this day and this time, are to recognize that blessedness.

For ourselves, for each other and for the all the saints, past present and future.

Amen.