

“Blessed”

The Reverend Pen Peery

Date: November 5, 2023



The southern writer Flannery O’Connor – a clear-eyed and committed Christian – once said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd.”

There’s no way for us to know what the people who heard Jesus share the beatitudes thought, but I would wager that some thought that the kinds of people who Jesus identified as “blessed” was rather strange.

After all, that’s just not the way the world works.

People who are meek don’t usually get rewarded.

People who are poor don’t inherit riches.

People who are hunger and thirst for righteousness usually stay hungry and thirsty.

But Jesus saw a bigger picture: What life might look like...not framed by the pressures and expectations of a broken world...but with the perspective that comes from being claimed by God’s love.

As such, those of us who follow Jesus are called to live differently. We measure our lives by a different standard than what the world defines as “success.” We emphasize different values than those that can be leveraged to “get ahead.” And all of that makes what we do as a church – and as a family of faith – feel a little different than the world around us.

Or, to put it more plainly: when you really think about it, the church is kind of odd.

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Here is what I mean: set aside for a moment the fact that we are gathered in nice clothes on a Sunday morning to sit in a room to *listen* and *pray* and *sing* while so many others in our city are out eating brunch, or still in their pajamas, or getting a head start on errands. And, set aside the fact that the community of people gathered in this room (and tuning in over our broadcast) is about the most *intergenerational* group you will be in save for your annual Thanksgiving dinner with extended family.

Just think about what we talk about and focus on while we are together...

We talk about hope when so many of the signs we see around us might lead us to consider hope to be a folly.

We are honest about our sin and brokenness and failure while so many others in the world around refuse to admit that they are anything other than “fine.”

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We name our fears and our vulnerabilities in such a way that it is clear we can do nothing else but depend on God’s grace to save us – all while the world around us labors under the myth they can save themselves if they just try harder.

We share the intimate and precious parts of our life with one another as community...celebrating milestones, struggles, celebrations, and the yearnings of our hearts.

And, related to the reason we are gathered in worship on this All Saints’ Sunday, as a church, we have this odd practice of acknowledging the reality of death...and making space, as a community, to grieve...and to remember...and to celebrate the lives of those who have died. More than that, as a church that is shaped by Christ’s resurrection, we have a context to acknowledge the reality of death...not without sadness, but also not without hope...because we know that death does not have the final word – that God’s love and claim are more powerful than the grave – that no one is beyond the reach of God’s grace no matter what.

We live in a world that has a complicated relationship with death.

So many times, the world tries its hardest to ignore death, resist mention of it, do what we can to avoid it...all of which is, ironically, fueled by the fear of death that drives our denial.

Other times, the world is casual about death...viewing tragedies only through the lens of statistics or collateral damage...keeping the stories of those who have died anonymous or distant so it doesn’t have to bring us any more pain or discomfort.

In both cases, the approach is somewhat predictable...if death is divorced from the promise of life eternal and if death is seen as the end.

In the church we understand death to be part of what it means to be created – we understand that death is an unavoidable chapter of life –

and yet death not something that gets in the way of God’s irresistible desire to bring us in God’s presence...we do not let death define our living because only God’s love can do that.

It is the truth.

So may that truth order our living – and bring us comfort as we honor the lives of those members of our family of faith who we will name today.