

Our Scripture for this All Saints’ Sunday is from the gospel of Matthew – a passage that begins what we call the Sermon on the Mount. It’s also known as the Beatitudes.

Before we hear these familiar words, I ask that you join me in prayer. Let us pray:

We are so often surrounded by noise, and words, and speech – O God. Words that try to capture our attention or allegiance. Words that are crafted in ways to try to influence our behavior and habits. In this space – and in these moments – help us quiet our minds so that the word we can focus on is yours. So speak to us once more – through this Scripture and by your Spirit – that we might hear good news. We ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘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.

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The Bible says that there were crowds when Jesus started giving this famous “Sermon on the Mount.”

We don’t know how large the crowds were.

Was it 5,000 – like the size of the group Jesus fed with 12 loaves and two fish?

Was it a few hundred (which may have been more likely – based on what we know about the modest population of the villages that surrounded the Sea of Galilee at that time).

However large the crowds were, you can be sure that it was a surprise to hear Jesus single out the kinds of people that he decided to bless.

You can imagine, can't you?

That the person in the crowd who **was** poor in spirit...whose faith had ebbed to a new low and who wasn't even sure if they believed anymore – or the person in the crowd just going through the motions because their grief **was overwhelming** all the time – or the person who **was** meek and lowly and always wishing they could be more courageous and bold...you can imagine that people in the crowd who were like that might expect Jesus to lift up and single out **other** kinds of people...people who had won over crowds of their own as they recruited others to join the Jesus movement...people who had stood toe-to-toe with the Pharisees and defended Jesus's teachings...people whose faith was *effusive* and *positive* and **evident**.

But when Jesus started teaching the crowds, this is what he said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

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Fast-forward a little bit.

Sitting in this sanctuary (or wherever you are as you listen to this sermon) – and overhearing Jesus give his Sermon on the Mount...I have a hunch that I am not the only one who assumes that when Jesus confers words like these; words of blessing and words of mercy and words of kindness - that he must be speaking to someone else.

People who deserve it.

People in his day, but not in ours.

People whose lives are much harder than our own.

Because, I mean, why would **we** be worthy?

And here comes the preacher choosing to read this passage on All Saints' Sunday - which really just makes that feeling of unworthiness even worse.

All Saints' Sunday is a day when we recognize the spiritual connection between those who have entered the church triumphant in their death, and those of us who are here as a living part of the body of Christ in the world.

This is a day when we hold the memory of those we have lost especially close. During communion today, we will read the names of 13 members of our congregation who have died in the past twelve months as a way to honor the ways they were special...to God and to us.

Many times, during a memorial service for members of our church who have died, I have read today's Scripture and used it to reflect back upon their life. As a preacher and pastor, one of the most sacred and

precious things I get to do is stand in this pulpit before a loved one’s family and friends and remind all of us of the ways God loves them...in life and in death. It’s not that the people whose lives we celebrate and grieve were perfect...but, in death, we often have the perspective to see that beyond any imperfections, God blesses them and showers them with grace.

You know what I often wonder?

I wonder why we so often wait to claim that promise as truth...why we wait to really believe it...until a person has died?

Why can’t we let that better inform the lives we are living?

My guess is that the answer to that question is that our lives are so busy and full that we are conditioned to respond better to a list of things we have to do...rather than accept the grace and truth of who we already are.

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber makes a similar observation. She notes that - so far removed from when they were first spoken - it is easy for us to hear the beatitudes and miss the point...to change this list of blessings into something that Jesus gives us to do. When we do this, it can be easy to see how we think that Jesus is commanding us to work really hard to be “meeker, and poorer, and mournier *in order that* we might be blessed by God.”

In other words, it is easy for us to hear these words as conditions that we should try to meet – like what was written on the stone tablets given by God to Moses on Mount Saini.

We forget that a blessing is different than a commandment.

Rather than giving us a list of instructions for what we should do - Jesus looks at what is - and loves it into something better.

Bolz-Weber writes, “[Jesus’] **pronouncement** of blessing is *actually what confers the blessing itself.*”¹

She continues, “Maybe the sermon on the mount is all about Jesus’ seemingly lavish blessing of the world around him especially that which society doesn’t seem to have much time for, people in pain, people who work for peace instead of profit, people who exercise mercy instead of vengeance.

*So maybe Jesus is actually **just** blessing people, especially the people who never seem to receive blessings otherwise. I mean, come on, doesn’t that just *sound* like something Jesus would do? Extravagantly throwing around blessings as though they grew on trees?”*

¹ This thought – and the later re-telling of the Beattitudes – are with thanks and credit to the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber. Also, to my colleague and friend, Shannon Kershner who preached on this text with Bolz-Weber’s idea a few years ago at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. I am indebted to both Nadia and Shannon for this sermon.

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I do wonder why we often wait to claim these blessings for ourselves.

I wonder why it feels more appropriate to read them in the context of a memorial service when we celebrate a life well-lived, than it does to trust that they might extend to the life we are living.

So on this All Saints' Sunday, as we remember the those who have gone before us, those Jesus would bless...I thought I might borrow a page out of Nadia Bolz-Weber's book and share some beatitudes for this day, for this place, and for these people.

Because I like to imagine that if Jesus climbed up a hill and looked out upon us, he might say:

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

Blessed are those who doubt - and still come here every once in a while because you want the good news of the gospel to be true.

Blessed are the anxious – who feel like the weight of the world (and their families) is on their shoulders.

Blessed are those who feel like they have to have it all together – even when it feels like everything is coming apart.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

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

Blessed are those whose grief is debilitating – in spite of the time that has passed.

Blessed are those who feel like they're past the best parts of their life – who look out into what is next with apprehension.

Blessed are those whose relationships have suffered – whose connection with spouse or partner feels cool...even cold.

Blessed are those who go to work because they have to, but wonder what joy could come from a job they actually enjoy.

Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who are meek, for you will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who avoid eye contact for fear of being noticed.

Blessed are you who are lonely.

Blessed are they who are out of work and out of options.

Blessed are you who have been labeled losers in a world that values those who win.

Blessed are you who struggle with your identity.

Blessed are the teenagers who wonder if people will take them seriously.

Blessed are those who are meek. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are you who are not satisfied with the way things are, and who wonder if you are working hard enough to make them better.
Blessed are the outraged – as you lift your voices for change.
Blessed are those who show up to tutor, or swing a hammer – in the hopes of making a small difference.
Blessed are the ones who risk alienation for the sake of their convictions.
Blessed as those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

Blessed are the merciful – for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are those who bake casseroles to be delivered to those who need to be reminded of the gift of a community that loves.
Blessed are those who pray – again and again – for names familiar and strange.
Blessed are those who practice forgiveness.
Blessed are the generous – and those who make imperfect business decisions for the sake of good people.
Blessed are the merciful. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you.

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What would it mean for your life if you heard Jesus saying those words to you?
Could you accept that you are accepted? That you are seen? That you are loved?

What I hope...and pray...is that this morning, if you are here – feeling insecure, ignored, unworthy, unsure, overwhelmed...wondering how you compare to those that Jesus cared about – or those saints whose names we will lift up – you will remember that **you are counted** as a part of Christ’s body we called the church.

And that because we are blessed – we can live more fully into what Jesus knows his body can be.