

Sunday, November 1, 2020

All Saints' Day (Year A)

Matthew 5.1-12

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/644675363077596>

(Sermon begins at about 15:00)

“Following in the Path of the Saints”

There is something about All Saints' Day and our Gospel reading of the Beatitudes coming just two days before Election Day—particularly Election Day 2020—that is a bit ironic? Paradoxical? No, poetic. What we see going on in the Gospel account of the Sermon on the Mount has some parallels to what is happening on the campaign trail. But also, some very stark differences. Parallels in that Jesus, like candidates for political office, is traveling around the countryside delivering his message, trying to get people to follow him, to buy into his vision of what things can and should be like. The differences are in how we get to that envisioned future.

Jesus has just begun his public ministry. After 40 days in the wilderness being tested, he emerges ready for ministry. He begins by calling the first few disciples (at this point in Matthew's Gospel he has only called four). He then sets out traveling through Galilee teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing. Underlying all this activity is one statement: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Mt 4.17). Sort of his campaign slogan.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' first major preaching gig. Throughout his travels, he has been attracting larger and larger crowds—those who want to hear what he has to say. And some of those want to live the life that he is espousing. The Sermon on the Mount is an extensive sermon that seeks to address just how they are to do that. The first part of the sermon—the part we hear today—is the Beatitudes. Essentially a preamble. Laying the foundation for what the kingdom of God means. And more importantly, laying the foundation and the expectations for those who would seek to be part of the kingdom of God. So, continuing the parallel with our elections, the scene on that mountain was effectively a campaign rally and the Sermon on the Mount was effectively Jesus' stump speech. Proclaiming his vision of where we are going and how we are going to get there. In hopes that those hearing will buy in, jump on board, and make it happen.

Now, of course, Jesus is not campaigning for office. He already has the job as Messiah. He is not running in opposition to another candidate for that job. But what he says is in opposition to the prevailing values of the day. As my Study Bible notes, “Surprisingly, in an imperial world that prizes power, wealth, and status, God's favor is found among the powerless and poor without resources and options who yearn for God's empire and faithful intervention. The second half of each blessing promises God's future reversal of these imperial situations. That reversal is already underway in Jesus' ministry. These blessings name the distressing consequences of Roman rule and promised God's victory over it.”¹ Of course, looking at the values of Jesus' day compared to ours, we see that things have not really changed that much. Power, wealth, and

status continue to be preferred over that which is of particular concern to God. And that is exactly what Jesus' message is addressing: the difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God's kingdom.

One commentary explains that "To the extent that his listeners are expecting Jesus to lay out an account of divine blessing that reveals how to get it and keep it, the Beatitudes come as a confounding surprise. In the first place, Jesus paints an utterly counterintuitive picture of blessedness: 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."²

Jesus' audience is not the wealthy, the powerful, the strong, the satisfied, the healthy, the comfortable. No, his audience is primarily comprised of the poor, the powerless, the weak, the empty, the sick, the uncomfortable. His audience knows they are not blessed. At least by the world's standards. But his message for them is that the ways of the world are not God's ways. That in God's kingdom—the kingdom that has come near—things are different. Things are turned upside down in God's kingdom. And in God's kingdom, it is they—the poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst, those who are persecuted, who are the ones who are truly blessed.

Some have attempted to turn the Beatitudes into a "how-to" manual. A guide as to what one needs to do to be considered blessed. Rather, this is meant to be a litany of those who are considered blessed in the eyes of God by virtue of their circumstances. Inclusion of such characteristics as "those who mourn" and "those who are persecuted" clarify this, as these are things one cannot make happen. At least not realistically or authentically. Instead, Jesus is giving a message of consolation, assurance, even hope, to those who are listening to him. To those who are already mourning, who are already being persecuted.

Admittedly, some of the Beatitudes are a bit vague or unclear on what Jesus actually meant, such as "blessed are the poor in spirit." But scholars generally recognize that each Beatitude echoes passages in the Old Testament—using a few words to call to mind a much greater concept that would have been known to the people of the day. Such as the reference to those who mourn being comforted likely being a reference back to Isaiah and prophecies that the Israelites in exile, who mourn the loss of their homeland and former way of life, will eventually be returned and therefore comforted. Without going into great detail and dissecting each Beatitude, the important thing for us today is the overarching structure and purpose of the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes roughly fall into two groups. The first four comprise one group, corresponding to characteristics of those who Jesus considers blessed. Those who are poor in spirit—those who recognize that they need God's love and mercy in their lives. Those who mourn—those who care deeply for others and are deeply affected by loss. Those who are meek—not weak, but who are genuinely humble and recognize their own limitations and the need for reliance upon God. And those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—those who yearn for right relationship with God and with their fellow human beings. Not everyone exhibits all these

characteristics, and not all exhibit them to the same degree. But what is significant is that all these are characteristics that are contrary to what our world sees as signs of success, but are foundational to the definition of success in God's kingdom.

The second set of Beatitudes reflects something of our responses to life's circumstances. Those who are merciful—those who naturally demonstrate mercy in their interactions with others. Those who are pure in heart—those who are able to see through or beyond the false narratives our society has created about what is of worth and to see the world and others as God sees them. Those who are peacemakers—those who seek the peace and harmony which are the foundation of God's reign. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake—those who are willing to live their values, God's values, and who are willing to take appropriate action when circumstances are counter to those values; even if it means that they will be persecuted. Here again, not everyone responds to their circumstances in all these ways. But these provide a general indication of how those who truly follow God's laws will be likely to respond, particularly when God's laws are violated. Forms of response that are counter to the ways of our world, but are foundational to the ways of God's kingdom.

While not exhaustive, the Beatitudes provide a sampling, a summary, of what it means to live as a child of God and therefore be blessed. But the listing is more than just informational. The intent of the Beatitudes is to provide an invitation to a new way of being. Not to follow the ways of our culture which value wealth, power, and influence. Not to follow the ways of our culture which celebrate those who are dominant, aggressive, and competitive. But an invitation to a new way of being based on valuing people for who they are—just for being children of God. A new way of being that does not seek to elevate oneself but to elevate others above oneself. A new way of being that does not seek what is best for oneself so much as to seek what is best for others. A new way of being that seeks right relationship with God and with others.

All this exemplifies what is behind our commemoration of All Saints' Day. The characteristics and responses Jesus outlines are more characteristic of the lives of the saints than are the prevailing qualities that are admired and exalted by secular society. Looking at the calendar of saints we use in The Episcopal Church, or looking at the saints in your own lives, we see that those we lift up as saints are not lifted up because they were wealthy or powerful. We do not lift them up because they responded to their life's circumstances with aggression or by seeking domination. We see that the saints are lifted up as models for a new way of living and being in accordance with God's ways.

While we talk about Jesus being the one who leads the way, who leads us on a new path, it can be scary to set out on that path. Yes, we have a guide, but Jesus is, well, Jesus. He is the Son of God. How can we possibly live up to that? But that's where the saints come in. That's why we designate people as saints. Those who were, in every way, just like us. Mere mortals who struggled with life, just as we do. Mere mortals who were flawed, just as we are. And yet, those who looked around them, saw that the ways of the world were not what they wanted to follow, and who had the courage to follow a different path. The path that Jesus laid before them.

Jesus may be the one who blazes a new trail. But the saints are those who had the courage to follow. They are the ones who show us that we, too, can follow where Jesus leads. And that in doing so, we, like them, will indeed be blessed.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1754.

² "Blessing Comes First: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for All Saints' Day," SALT, October 26, 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/26/blessing-comes-first-salts-commentary-for-all-saints-day>.