Sunday, November 1, 2026
All Saints' Sunday (Year A)
Matthew 5.1-12
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

"Blessedness as Identity"

I don't know if it's just me, or if all clergy struggle with this. But it seems to me that the Church sort of has a fast and loose approach to dealing with All Saints' Sunday. Particularly when All Saints' Day and All Saints' Sunday fall on the same day. Perhaps it may seem to be splitting hairs, but for those who are liturgically obsessive-compulsive, these are the kinds of things that have the potential to send you into a tailspin. Allow me to explain.

All Saints' Day, which is celebrated on November 1st, is one of the seven "Principal Feasts" observed by the Church. In addition to All Saints', Principal Feasts include Easter Day, Ascension Day, the Day of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, Christmas Day, and The Epiphany. While three of these always fall on a Sunday, four do not always fall on Sunday, and one never does. Each of these Principal Feasts are to be celebrated on the actual date on which they fall and are NOT transferred to a Sunday. With the exception of All Saints' Day. If not falling on a Sunday, "All Saints' Day may always be observed on the Sunday following November 1, in addition to its observance on the fixed day" (BCP, p.15). What this tells us is that the Church Fathers determined that, not only is All Saints' one of the handful of Principal Feasts of the Church, it is so special that of all the Principal Feasts, it CAN be moved to a Sunday to ensure it is properly celebrated. And, that it can actually be celebrated twice if November 1st is not a Sunday. That is saying something. In addition, All Saints' is designated as one of the four Baptismal days—days considered particularly appropriate for the performing of Baptisms. So, suffice it to say, the celebration of All Saints' is a really big deal.

The logistics of the calendar are not, however, the part where struggles enter in. The calendar part is pretty clear. The real struggle is what or who do we specifically commemorate on All Saints' Day? First off, in its truest sense, a saint is any faithful person—that is, all believers. However, traditionally, on All Saints' Day we remember those whom we typically think of as "official" saints, those who have been canonized, or specifically declared saints, by the Church. These include the likes of St. Gregory the Great our patron, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick, the Blessed Virgin Mary, etc. The biggies. So as not to leave out the saints who are mere common folk, the Church has added an additional day. All Souls Day, also known as the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, on November 2nd, is set aside to remember all the "regular" folks who have died. On this day, we remember our own loved ones who have entered into eternal life. Some churches—probably most—make things simple by combining All Saints' Day and All Souls Day into one celebration on All Saints' Sunday, remembering all the saints who have gone before—famous and ordinary, known and unknown. Which is what we do today. If anything, our commemoration errs more on the side of specifically remembering All the Faithful Departed, which, by default, would include the biggies. Thus honoring the intent of the designation, if not actually adhering to the strict liturgical designation.

Judging by today's Gospel reading, Jesus would agree with the focus of this commemoration being ALL the saints, famous and ordinary, known and unknown. With a particular emphasis on the ordinary and the unknown.

Today's Gospel reading is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus' first significant preaching and teaching gig of his public ministry. Jesus has just been baptized, whisked away by the Spirit to spend forty days in the wilderness, being tempted and tested by the devil. Just returned from the wilderness, Jesus begins calling his disciples. At this point, he has only called four of the twelve. He has barely even begun his actual ministry, traveling through Galilee teaching in a few synagogues and healing some people. But even so, his fame is spreading. Crowds are beginning to follow him, wanting to hear what he has to tell them. And today, he delivers his first major sermon and teaching session to a huge crowd. Covering a wide range of topics giving guidance about living a holy and righteous life. A sermon that includes many key statements that we associate with Jesus. A sermon that itself exemplifies who Jesus is and what he is about.

From the very beginning of his public ministry, "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Mt 4.17). And here, he tells the gathered crowd—and us—just what that means. Everything else that follows merely expands upon and provides more detail as to what it means for the kingdom of heaven to be near and for us to be part of that kingdom. In so doing, going back to basics. What is religion—any religion—ultimately about? In the ancient world as well as our own, theistic religion is first and foremost concerned with divine blessing. Who is deserving of divine blessing? How do we obtain divine blessing? What do we have to do to keep divine blessing once received? And so on. Here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes on, in a general and overarching way, those very questions. Beginning with the subject of blessing. With a whole string of statements beginning with "Blessed are . . ." Giving rise to the name commonly given to this section of the Sermon on the Mount: the Beatitudes. Beatitude, from the Latin word meaning "blessedness."

So, what does it mean to be blessed, according to Jesus? Right off the bat, Jesus turns questions about blessedness—who is blessed, how we obtain blessing, how we keep blessing—on their heads. Everything he says about blessedness is counterintuitive. Looking at the world in Jesus' time as well as our own, looking at prevailing social attitudes, it is easy to conclude that the blessed are the wealthy, happy, strong, satisfied, safe, and well-liked. Even including those who might obtain apparent blessedness by being ruthless, deceptive, and aggressive. But here, Jesus says the exact opposite. Those who are truly blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the gentle, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers, the persecuted, and the reviled. How can that even be? How can we consider someone who falls into any of those categories as being blessed? Would anyone within any of those categories truly consider themselves to be blessed?

That may be our reaction, unable to quite grasp Jesus' counterintuitive definition of blessedness. Although, many if not most of the people in the crowd hearing Jesus first speak these words would have heard a very different message. They would have seen and heard themselves in the definition of blessedness Jesus outlined. Those who followed Jesus through the countryside were themselves the poor and the hungry, the marginalized and the persecuted. They may not have considered themselves blessed before now, but hearing Jesus

speak those words, some of whom may have been healed by him, or witnessed what he could accomplish, would have heard a message of hope. Words that assured them that despite their position or condition in life, in God's kingdom, they are blessed. And as such, the kingdom of heaven belongs to them, precisely because of who they are. A place in which they will see God. Not just see God but be children of God. Thereby ensuring that they will receive comfort, be filled, receive mercy, be protected, be respected. They will be loved for who they are as children of God. For Jesus' original audience, his words would have been words of comfort. They would have been words of assurance. They would have been words affirming their fundamental identity as children of God. Jesus' use of the word "blessed" addressing the question of identity that would have loomed over those in the crowd that day. An identity in which, in secular society, they may have been a nobody, but in God's kingdom, they were a somebody. Not just a somebody, but somebody who is blessed.

Having laid out his definition of what it means to be blessed, of who he views as being blessed, the question almost immediately becomes, "what do we do with that?" Certainly, in our own time and society, we occasionally find ourselves to be poor in spirit, or mourning, or persecuted. But these do not generally define who we are. Living in a different culture, a different time, many Christians look at the Beatitudes and question how this definition of blessedness applies to us. If we are not poor in spirit, or mourning, or persecuted, are we truly blessed? That question can lead to the view that the Beatitudes is some sort of spiritual to-do list, a how-to manual, for obtaining God's blessing.

Jesus is hardly suggesting or recommending that his listeners purposefully create conditions to be poor in spirit, or to mourn, or to be persecuted, or what have you. The Beatitudes are not meant to imply that blessedness is transactional. That to be blessed we need to do or be X, Y, or Z. He does not say "Blessed are the poor in spirit if they do such-and-such." He says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is kingdom of heaven." Already. Given without condition. And so on through each of the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a promise of blessedness already conferred. Nor is the Beatitudes meant to be a shaming tactic. Just because Jesus identifies those meeting particular criteria as being blessed does not mean that if we do not fall in any of those categories, we are not blessed or worthy of blessing.

Rather, the bottom line of Jesus' message is that he is delivering good news to those most in need of hearing it. To those who do not feel they are blessed because of life's circumstances. That despite their circumstances, despite how they are viewed by society, they are indeed blessed. And while that blessing may not be felt or experienced here and now, in this life, it will most certainly be borne out in the kingdom of heaven. This is Jesus' assurance and Jesus' promise.

And what about those of us who, by other metrics, would otherwise be considered blessed? What if we do not fall into any of the categories that Jesus names as blessed? The good news here is that, similarly, we do not need to do anything to get or to keep God's blessing. Because the bottom line is that when it comes to divine blessing, it is already graciously given to all! Just not necessary in the ways we might expect. The important thing is that God's blessing is not transactional, is not a reward for following certain commands, but rather is a gift freely and graciously given by God. A gift freely and graciously given to all. Even if we do not always feel that blessing in this life, we are all assured of blessedness in God's kingdom.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus starts by laying the foundation, by providing the core teaching of the kingdom of heaven. That all are blessed. This is not just a state or condition. Blessedness is our identity. As the saints of God in our own age, we are called to fully live into that identity, into that blessedness. Just as those saints who have gone before us into the heavenly realm have done. And we look to them as our example. As one commentator notes, "God's blessings are already among us, surprising and counterintuitive, gracious and undeserved, world-turning and beautiful, and we're called to live lives that are responsive to those blessings at every turn. That's what 'all saints' do: they live as if the reign of heaven is at hand—because it is!"[1]

[1] https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/26/blessing-comes-first-salts-commentary-for-all-saints-day