

BLESSINGS FOR THE UNBLESSED

Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints' Day

November 4, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for All Saints' Day comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 12. It is on page 683 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus pronounces blessings, and some of them are in unlikely places. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 5, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

² And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear saints, this world is filled with evil. But you, of course, know this already. Maybe you watch the news. Maybe you read the newspaper. Or maybe you get moment by moment updates of all the evil in the world sent straight to your phone. Evil is always just a screen away. Sometimes we mourn when we hear about these distant evils, but most of the time we don't, because we've just become so calloused to it.

But eventually something happens that jolts us out of our apathy and reminds us that evil is much more personal. It's closer than a screen. Evil will eventually find its way to us.

Sometimes there is something evil that another person has done to you—some kind of sin that was committed against you. Or you might even realize that you are the evil person who has committed some kind of horrible evil against another person. Perhaps you fall into both

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categories. In reality, we all, to some degree or another, fall into both categories. We have committed evil acts against other people, and other people have committed evil acts against us.

Another way evil finds us is when we lose someone. That is, when someone dies. Today, on All Saints' Day, we remember our loved ones in the faith who have fallen asleep in Jesus. It's kind of like an annual funeral. The big difference, though, is that it's not just for one person. It's for all the saints.

And "saint" is just another word for "Christian." We're not just remembering the famous saints that churches are named after, people like St. Paul, St. John, St. Mary, or St. Athanasius. And we're not just remembering all those people who were just so nice they wouldn't hurt a fly. We're remembering all those who trusted Jesus for salvation and fell asleep under his protection. We're remembering sinners who were saved by grace. That's what a saint is.

So we're remembering people we actually knew. They could be our parents or grandparents. They could be our children or grandchildren. They could be spouses or friends or various kinds of relatives. We're remembering people we actually knew. Some of them we knew well enough to be able to say, "They were no saint"—at least, not according to the colloquial definition. We might have known some of their dark secrets, and we might have seen them at their worst. For some of them, their worst might have even been at the very end, when the pain of illness and death made them rather grumpy and difficult to be around. That happens sometimes, and it leaves us with a bad memory. Their behavior might not have appeared very saint-like. But a saint is simply someone who trusts in Jesus for salvation. A saint is someone who has been made holy through forgiveness in Jesus Christ. So there might be some people who acted like saints, but really weren't. And there might be some people who didn't always act like saints, but really were. It's a matter of faith. So today we remember the saints we knew who fell asleep in Jesus Christ.

We remember those who fell asleep in the last year. From our own congregation we think of Natalia, Stephen, and Jennifer. Many of you think of others who didn't belong to our congregation, but they were important to you. We might even remember those who fell asleep many years ago. We remember them because they are still gone, and our loss is still here. Grief changes, but it doesn't go away, because there's still a hole where that person used to be. It's kind of like losing your arm. You learn how to get by without it, but your arm is still gone. And when you lose a person, that part of your life is still gone, even many years later. It's okay to continue to mourn that loss. That's part of what All Saints' Day is about. The biggest part, though, is that we praise God for the gift of faith he gave to the saints, and for the promise of the Resurrection of the Dead on the Last Day. We look forward to that glorious Day, because, in the meantime, we have to live with the evil of their absence. Dear saints, this world is filled with evil.

In the midst of this evil Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of heaven is at hand and pronounces blessings where we least expect them.

We call these blessings "The Beatitudes." Nine times Jesus says, "Blessed are ..." This text is all about Jesus pronouncing blessings.

Now I don't know about you, but for the longest time I considered this passage to be a how-to list of how to get blessed. I focused on the virtues Jesus extolled, and I thought, *If I can just develop those virtues, then God will bless me.* It was really quite silly. There could hardly be a

worse example of theological narcissism. Narcissism, by the way, is an unhealthy fascination with yourself. So theological narcissism is when you think theology is all about you, and the Bible is all about what you have to do to please God. I focused on the virtues and was blind to everything else Jesus said. And there are really only three virtues in the text: “merciful” (5:7), “pure in heart” (5:8), and “peacemakers” (5:9). And even in the case of those three, it’s not really about developing those virtues in order to obtain a blessing. It’s still all about Jesus pronouncing blessings. That’s what’s going on in this text. Jesus is pronouncing blessings.

And some of the blessings he pronounces are rather surprising. We’ll start with the first one, and this is amazing. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3). Now think about that. “The poor in spirit.” Or, to put it another way, these are the people who are spiritually poor. In the economy of heaven, these people have absolutely nothing going for them. They are flat-broke spiritually. We think of the tax collectors and sinners Jesus was hanging out with. These are the people who should have no claim to the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. This makes about as much sense as saying, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs are the mansions on Reeves Drive.” You would say, “Uh, no they’re not. That’s where the rich people live.” But the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. You see, the kingdom of heaven belongs to Jesus first, and Jesus gives it to whomever he wants to. You can’t buy it, and you can’t earn it. But Jesus gives it to the poor in spirit.

And what’s even more surprising is that the poor in spirit possess the kingdom of heaven *now*. Most of the beatitudes are about what will happen in the future. Those who mourn shall be comforted (5:4). The meek shall inherit the earth (5:5). Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be satisfied (5:6). The merciful shall receive mercy (5:7). The pure in heart shall see God (5:8). And the peacemakers shall be called sons of God (5:9). The middle six are all about the future. But the first one and the last two are in the present tense. That’s because these three have to do with the kingdom of heaven. And this might be really shocking to us, because we tend to think of the kingdom of heaven as something off in the future. But Jesus says it’s not. Jesus says it is *now*. This was the first thing Jesus preached publicly. If we back up to Matthew 4:17, we see that the first thing Jesus preached was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom of heaven is now.

But how can this be? This world is filled with evil. It doesn’t look very much like heaven. Here’s the thing: the kingdom of heaven isn’t so much about a place, as it is about a person. It’s about the King. Wherever the King is, that is where the kingdom is. When Jesus came to earth the first time, he established the kingdom of heaven on earth. And even though he has now ascended into heaven, Jesus still reigns on this earth, because the same things that Jesus did as king are still happening. The good news is still being proclaimed, and sins are still being forgiven. That is what the kingdom of heaven looks like on this earth. If you want the kingdom of heaven to appear in more glory, that will come in the new creation. That’s what the middle six beatitudes are all about. But as long as this earth is subject to death and filled with evil, the mission of the kingdom of heaven is to preach the good news and forgive sins. So the poor in spirit—that is, the unrighteous and evil sinners—are blessed, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is now, even though the fullness of what it will be has not yet appeared. That’s what the middle six beatitudes are about.

So Jesus says, **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”** This especially has to do with mourning the death of a loved one who falls asleep in Jesus. The comfort Jesus speaks of is not yet; it is still off in the future. Those who mourn are blessed now, but they are blessed because of what *will* happen. The comfort is in the future. And I, for one, am glad this comfort is still off in the future. Because if what we experience in this life is the full extent of God’s comfort, then it’s not enough. I want more, and you should too! Getting over it isn’t good enough. Learning to live with loss isn’t good enough. I want my grandparents back. I want my uncle back. Someday my parents are going to die, and I’m going to want them back. Other people are going to die too, and I’m going to want them back. And you’ve lost people. I know that many of you have lost so much more than I have. Getting over it isn’t good enough. Learning to live with loss isn’t good enough. And God knows this. **“Blessed are those who mourn,”** because, for the saints in Christ Jesus, there is more. The comfort Jesus talks about is not a shoulder to cry on. That’s good, but God can do more, and he will. The comfort Jesus promises is nothing less than the Resurrection of the Dead. **“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away”** (Rev. 21:4). This is the sure and certain hope for the saints of God in Jesus Christ.

It sounds strange to say, **“Blessed are those who mourn.”** It makes a lot more sense to say, **“Blessed are those whose loved ones aren’t dead.”** But Jesus calls those who mourn blessed, because he’s going to do something about this death.

There are other beatitudes that are equally strange, like, **“Blessed are the meek.”** Meekness is kind of like humility, but the kind of humility Jesus talks about here isn’t the virtue of acting humble when you’re actually really awesome. It’s being humble when you’re *not* awesome. It’s the kind of humility you have when you finish last.

I ran track when I was in high school. I remember one race where I was in dead last, as usual. I was way behind when some guy on the side of the track said to me, **“Don’t worry, somebody’s gotta ...”**—well, it’s church so I can’t really finish what he said, but it wasn’t nice. I think what I felt in that moment was the kind of meekness Jesus was talking about. It’s humility when the circumstances of your life humiliate you. Jesus calls these people blessed, **“for they shall inherit the earth.”**

Then there are **“those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”** At first this sounds kind of virtuous. I mean, it’s good to want righteousness, right? But the only people who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who don’t have any. If you had righteousness, you wouldn’t hunger and thirst for it anymore. You would be satisfied with your righteousness. But those who hunger and thirst for it do so because they don’t have any. So Jesus calls people who have no righteousness of their own blessed, **“for they shall be satisfied.”** That is, Jesus is going to give them his own righteousness.

This is very similar to the “poor in spirit” blessing. Jesus takes our sins upon himself, he dies with them, and, in exchange, he gives us his own perfect righteousness. This is how he blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Then there are three blessings pronounced on the virtuous—the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. These are blessings for demonstrating virtue. And this shouldn’t really surprise us. Sometimes as Christians we get so accustomed to the gracious gospel promises in

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the first four beatitudes that we kind of dismiss beatitudes like this because they sound like works-righteousness. But they're not. The beatitudes follow a certain order. Once the poor in spirit have received the kingdom, and once the unrighteous have received Christ's righteousness, they start to demonstrate the virtues Jesus describes here. It's part of the life of faith. It's not something we do in order to earn God's favor, because that is given freely in the previous beatitudes. But it's something that begins to happen once Christ's righteousness satisfies our hearts. God still cares about mercy, purity, and peace.

And then the last two blessings return to the present reality of the kingdom of heaven. **"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."** And then it's like Jesus turns and looks right at his disciples, and he becomes more direct: **"Blessed are you when others 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."**

We don't really face persecution for our faith here. Hostility? Sometimes. But not persecution like the saints of old or the saints in other parts of the world. But I can't imagine they feel very blessed in that moment. If I were in their place, I would think, *God, why are you letting this happen? This isn't right. You should do something about this. This isn't fair.* In the midst of this evil, Jesus calls them **"blessed."** They are blessed because they possess the kingdom of heaven, and no one can take that away. You may lose your home, your reputation, or even your life for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. Rejoice and be glad. You possess a kingdom, and your reward will be great.

At least most of these blessings are quite unexpected. We might consider the people Jesus describes in the beatitudes to be very *unblessed*. But Jesus calls them **"blessed."** He pronounces blessings upon them because the kingdom of heaven had come upon them. Wherever Jesus is, that is where the kingdom is. Whatever Jesus is doing, that is the kingdom work. Even at the cross—especially at the cross—Jesus is reigning over his kingdom. If the beatitudes surprise us, the cross will surprise us even more. Because there, our king defeats sin and death by absorbing our sin into himself and racing headlong into death. This is how he triumphs over the devil and all his evil deeds. The result of this is the forgiveness of our sin. And this is why Jesus can promise righteousness and a kingdom to those who shouldn't have any right to it. He can even promise to comfort the mourners, because, just as he rose victoriously over death, he will also raise to life all who fell asleep trusting in him. We find the kingdom of heaven at the cross.

We even find the kingdom of heaven here among us today. We find it in the Word of God, and we find it in the Sacraments, because that is where Christ is, and that is how he promises to work among us. So we find the kingdom of heaven at this communion railing.

We're going to sing "For All the Saints." And the fourth stanza of that hymn describes the comfort we have in Holy Communion. It speaks of the communion we still have with those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ.

O blest communion,
fellowship divine,
We feebly struggle,
they in glory shine;

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Yet all are one
in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

We feebly struggle through this life while the departed saints shine in glory. But we are not so far away from them, because the same Christ they communed of when they were alive, and the same Christ they now behold in heaven, is here with us and for us in the bread and wine. We can't touch or communicate with the departed saints. Our connection with them is not direct. It is mediated through Christ Jesus. But we are one with them, because all the saints are one in Christ Jesus. So let this sacrament be a foretaste of that great reunion on the Last Day when Christ comes to raise the dead. The same Jesus they behold in heaven is the Jesus we receive in bread and wine. He comes to bless us. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)