

“Blessed Are God’s Saints”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 1, 2020 – All Saints’ Day

Matthew 5: 1-12

More than 4,000 people. That’s how many have died in the state of Indiana thus far from the coronavirus. We reached that grim milestone this week. The number of people who have died from Covid-19 in Indiana would fill Hilbert Circle Theater – nearly three times over.

I think we’ve all become numb to the daily numbers. After a while they start to lose their impact, when we see them climbing day after day. But for our state and our nation and our world, these numbers are people. Mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, siblings and children, grandparents and coworkers. They are literally empty seats at dining room tables, storytellers who will no longer tell their story, and saints who have entered into God’s eternal home.

On this All Saints’ Day, when we remember those women and men who have died over the past year, we are faced with this stark reality to an even greater degree. Suffering, loss, and grief will undoubtedly mark 2020 unlike other years we have lived through, and we are yearning for hope, life, and peace in ways that might heal our pain and bring us wholeness in ever new ways.

On this day when we remember the saints who have gone before us, and we continue to live through loss and uncertainty like never before, we are reminded once again of God’s hope that is found in the present and future. The Beatitudes offer us both a reminder of God’s blessings in the world around us, and the hope for a promised future which will mark all of God’s saints as blessed children of God.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount makes clear how many people had already been touched by Jesus’ teaching and healing, and were following him to learn much more. Out of Jesus’ mouth came what we have come to know as the Beatitudes. They are those sayings which are so familiar: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” They are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, they are the teachings which set the stage for Jesus’ greatest lessons on God and the heavenly kingdom. It was from these nine beatitudes that the crowds were opened to God’s grace and wisdom through God’s only Son.

I wonder how the people reacted when they heard them. I know that I always thought they were the simple rules by which I was to live. Be a peacemaker, hunger and thirst for righteousness, be merciful to your brother or sister – if I did those things, I would be living according to

Christ's example. I'm sure many of us grew up with that impression of the Beatitudes, that they were a moral rulebook which directed the Christian in his or her life. Oftentimes, that's what we're looking for from the Bible – a set of guidelines which can help us lead our lives better. We can't seem to set the rules for ourselves, as we constantly forget or break them. In the Bible, in our church's Book of Order, in our country's Constitution, we are trying to find the lessons of life which can provide the structure, the framework, and the rules by which we are to conduct our lives.

We usually assume that this is the only place where beatitudes appear, that they are something which Jesus originated. Well, that's actually not true. In fact, beatitudes occur in both the Old and New Testaments, and are rooted in the literature of the Jewish tradition. A beatitude is a whole body of sayings with a similar literary form, such as the repetition of the sayings in Matthew 5. Yet they are also found in the Psalms and wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

So, when Jesus tells the crowds these first thoughts of the Sermon on the Mount, he is speaking in a way which is familiar and understandable to them. The order and rhythm of the sayings would have been easy to understand, for the people would have heard those same things in the synagogue. In many ways, what Jesus said was not that different in content from the Old Testament, as each beatitude reflects how one is blessed by God according to each of these traits in one's life.

Perhaps that is what is so easily lost in the Beatitudes, the fact that God is granting his blessing on those who show these traits. These verses could be translated "Happy are those who are meek or poor in spirit . . ." but that doesn't do justice to what is being said by Jesus. It's more that being happy, or being glad. It's about being blessed, being marked, being claimed by God because of who you are and what you are doing. These nine sayings are putting the emphasis on God, not on individuals. They are an act of God which occurs through human beings, an act of God which shows the love and grace of God which we cannot create on our own.

Whenever we reduce these sayings of Jesus to a moral checklist, we place the emphasis on ourselves and how they will lead us to a better life. "If I just became more pure in my heart, I would find peace and happiness. If I just worked for peace between my neighbors, I would be successful in my friends' eyes." Whenever we try to box these sayings into a list of "rights and wrongs", we are not fully aware of what Jesus intended for his audience to understand on that hillside.

He wanted them to see that he was more than some special prophet who had come to teach them. He was more than some faith healer who cured their infirmities. He had already been singled out when he was baptized by John through the mark of the Holy Spirit and God's

affirmation that “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In him the people touched God, heard God, saw God face-to-face. He was the real deal – Emmanuel, God with us.

Because he was who he was, Jesus came not preaching about the here and now, but about what is to come. The Sermon on the Mount is his opportunity to allow people to see what the future holds, what God’s kingdom is like and how they will be a part of it. Notice that each of the beatitudes begins with the present tense, and ends with the future tense: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” One way to interpret these sayings is to first recognize that there are, in the present, people who are being merciful, who are pure in their hearts, who are seeking peace. Whenever we recognize that these traits are present in the people around us, we are reassured that God is present with us here and now. When we accept that fact, then we can truly place our trust in God that there will be a life hereafter. That is the message which Christ brought to a hillside in Galilee. That is the message Matthew wanted to communicate to the early Church. That is the message God is calling us to hear: God is here, and God’s kingdom is not far away.

How do these familiar words of Jesus apply to our lives today, especially as we celebrate All Saints’ Day? Tim Beach-Verhey writes:

The already-and-not-yet character of the kingdom of God is an appropriate message on All Saints’ Day. This is a day that lends itself to reflection on the distinction and connection between the church militant and the church triumphant. We have communion not only with our contemporaries, as we struggle together in the midst of a broken world; we also commune with the saints who have gone before us and received their eternal rest. The saints triumphant bear witness both to the faith that the God of Jesus Christ is the true ruler of the universe and to a way of living that suits such a Lord. The saints provide a glimpse of God’s already in the midst of our not-yet. Through our communion with them, we live in an eschatological moment, where God’s kingdom is breaking into the world. We continue to wrestle with faith, but we are connected to a faith that is secure; we continue to face a world that is not yet conformed to God’s will, yet we are related to those who have experienced God’s victory; we continue to struggle to live the Christian life, but we are in community with those whose lives have been made perfect (Tim Beach-Verhey, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 240).

I have found in my life that when I am at my lowest, God finds a way to remind me of my connection to the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before me. And in those moments, I am reminded of the future that God has promised because of the ways I have witnessed God acting in my life through those saints.

I witness Jillian Flynn presenting her faith with honesty and confidence at the end of her care process for ordination, and I am

reminded of her grandfather, Don Charboneau, who nurtured her in the faith by inviting her to attend John Knox more than a decade ago. Blessed are God's saints.

I witness incredible courage by health care workers in our community who are providing mercy and care to patients above and beyond the norm, who are holding dying patients' hands as they enter into God's eternal kingdom, and I am reminded of the mentors and teachers who modeled for them what loving one another is truly about. Blessed are God's saints.

I witness my daughters and others of their generation who hunger and thirst for righteousness for those who are on the margins of our society, and I am reminded of the saints who embodied in their lives why such hard work is necessary – saints such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers and leaders. Blessed are God's saints.

We are living in an in-between time, as we hope for a future that God is seeking to show us in the present. The saints are our connection to these two distinct times, for we share communion from our past and present, and trust they have entered into God's future care. When we are struggling, may we feel their presence in a clear and distinct way, so we might rejoice and be glad, knowing that our reward will be great in heaven for the work we are called to do here and now. Thanks be to God. Amen.