

“Lessons of the Saints”
November 5, 2023
Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

On the day we celebrate the Saints, the Sunday closest to November 1st, we often hear a form of this sermon by Jesus. The Beatitudes are found in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels. They’re slightly different. I think in some ways Matthew’s version is a little easier to take; Luke’s has a set of blessings followed by a set of woes that can be pretty harsh. But they’re both concerned with describing the world in a way that upends our assumptions and experiences of how the world works.

Our world, much like in the 1st century when Jesus preached, is driven more by the powerful and wealthy than the weak and impoverished. That’s no surprise. We all know money buys access to all the things most people need to live well. In his book *Just Mercy*, the lawyer Bryan Stevenson who works with people incarcerated unjustly, sometimes on death row, observes at one point, “the opposite of justice is poverty.” Those who can afford it usually get the best representation and verdicts. That was true in Jesus’ day, too. So to say that the poor are blessed, even if you qualify it as the poor in spirit, would have sounded pretty odd to the people around Jesus.

The same goes for people who mourn or people who are meek or who hunger and thirst for righteousness. All these conditions and qualities would have been seen as disadvantages, things to be avoided at all costs. Even when it comes to peacemaking very often those who attempt it are attacked. Yet, by insisting on reframing our understanding of these things, Jesus offers a vision of the world and of living that can open us up to the kingdom of heaven. You notice these aren’t commandments. We’re not obliged to do any of this. But if we embrace this way of experiencing our lives we can change the world around us in profound ways.

And when we live in that way we leave behind a legacy. I don’t know everyone on this list of names we’re celebrating today. But I do know every one of them has left behind an impression on the people who loved them. None of them was perfect just like none of us is perfect. But every one of them has a lesson to share, a way of living that can help shape us and bring us into deeper awareness of God’s kingdom.

Think about those folks in your lives whom you’ve lost. When they were poor in spirit, where did they turn? When they mourned, how did they find comfort? Did they hunger and thirst for righteousness, within themselves and in the world? Were they able to live meekly, giving up their own power so others could thrive? Were they merciful toward you and others in their lives? Did they cultivate, or try to, a purity of heart? Were they peacemakers in their small corner of the world?

I suspect the answer to most of those questions is, “sometimes, but not always.” We don’t call them saints because they were perfect. They’re holy for us because we saw them persevere in spite of their imperfections. And their lives molded ours: sometimes teaching us what to do, sometimes what not to do. That’s why we hold onto them.

I'll give you an example: My father was not perfect. I watched him struggle for years with alcoholism, going in and out of recovery programs, getting sober for a while and then falling off the wagon. It was maddening for our family. He hungered and thirsted to be whole, but he fought all the time with the reality of his condition. It made him in some ways more merciful, more compassionate for the struggles of others. And eventually, after I could finally let go of my anger and resentment, his example made me more understanding. He did find sobriety at the end of his life; he found peace. The grief he carried for so long was comforted. And in seeing that in him, I learned it's possible for me, too. He wasn't perfect but his memory is sacred for me. And even now, after he's been gone 25 years, I'm still learning from him.

This is why it's so important we remember the saints who have graced our lives. They helped make us who we are. We owe them a debt of gratitude, even if not all our memories of them are positive. Sometimes, though, some of them did manage to embody these beatitudes, these qualities of the spirit that open us to God's kingdom. And in their struggles and triumphs, their sorrows and joys, they were blessed. And through them, by their influence on our lives, so are we blessed.

This morning we take time to give thanks for that blessing. We stop what we're doing and speak their names, light a candle, hold them in our minds and hearts. For God's kingdom is built, or maybe if you prefer discovered, through the relationships of love we share in this life. We gather from these saints lessons that take us deeper within ourselves, help us understand ourselves more fully, so we can pass that on to those who come after us and will someday, we pray, remember us with affection.

I invite you, then, to turn in your bulletins to the list of names we honor this morning. And let us with humility and love remember the saints whose memories we hold sacred and have taught us how to live in ways that reveal God's kingdom in the world.