

All Saints Sunday
November 5, 2017
Rev. Chip Whitacre
Matthew 5:1-12

Every year on All Saints Day we read the Beatitudes, usually from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. They get their name from the Latin term *beatus*, which means happy or blessed. The blessings are taken from among the Psalms and Prophets of the Hebrew scriptures. Some authorities suggest that Psalm 1 serves as the basis for the Sermon on the Mount:

*Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
Or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of the scoffers;
But their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their
leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.*

Ecclesiasticus offers a little more entertaining and perhaps a more accurate reflection of human nature:

*Happy is the one who lives to see his enemies downfall.... Or
Happy is the husband of a sensible wife....or this gem of wisdom
Happy the farmer who does not plow with ox and ass together...and of course my personal
favorite...Happy is the speaker who has an attentive audience.*
Of course, the writer redeems himself at the end by claiming fear of the Lord as the greatest happiness.

The words of the Beatitudes are so familiar to us that it is easy to let them flow over us without really hearing what's in them. Each is a blessing and a promise. It is easy to hear the promise contained in each one without considering the responsibility that comes with the blessing. Each of the blessings is, in effect, a reminder of the right path of discipleship. The promise comes from following the path. While some of the blessings are surprising, what is more surprising are the promises. All of them are in this life. None of them are pending final resolution of our life's journey. And some of them are immediate.

Personally, I have spent a good portion of my life resisting the first blessing. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What does poor in spirit mean and why is it a good thing? It sounds so inadequate, so lacking in some fundamental way. It sounded too much like not having enough school spirit or religious enthusiasm. I suspect you can already see that this was an ego problem. And yet the promise is so immediate and unbelievably generous that I just knew there had to be more to it. Then I happened across a different interpretation. The New English Bible translates it as "Blessed are these that know their need of God". The message being that to know and accept our utter dependence on God for all things is critical to attaining

the kingdom of heaven. And that helped. I still can't say that I accept dependence on God completely, but at least I feel like I have a better understanding of what Jesus meant.

Some of the values that Jesus expresses in the Beatitudes are challenging to our twenty-first century understanding. The meek will inherit the earth, for example. To be meek means gentle of spirit, which is a good thing, but it also implies a gentleness that is submissive and easily taken advantage of. That is hard for us to accept, and I imagine it was in Jesus' time too. But in first century society to be meek meant to not use one's power and position to create unfair advantage over others. That is something we can understand for all times. Even so we know enough about ourselves and human behavior in general to know that this is no small thing to achieve. I think the magnitude of the promise in this case, inheritance of the earth – whatever that means - is an indicator of the difficulty.

Still others of these blessings present us with the possibility of particularly difficult challenges. To hunger and thirst for righteousness may lead to the promise of fulfillment. But it can also put one on a path against the prevailing culture; a position that can be lonely and uncomfortable. The peacemakers may be called the children of God, but stepping into the breach between parties in conflict is hard work that can be particularly dangerous. We need to hear a couple of these blessings with an extra note of caution. Because they come with responsibility to aspire to achieve certain moral qualities. In particular, the qualities of mercy and purity of heart. In first century parlance to be merciful meant to honor one's interpersonal obligations to family and society. But we also know that it includes practicing forgiveness. To be pure in heart is to think with the heart as well as the mind and act accordingly. Neither of these are innate and require some serious contemplation and attention.

Today, we remember those who have exhibited these qualities in many and varied ways. The litany of saints includes men and women who left behind everything and everyone they knew to serve the Gospel and those who never left their home. Those who risked much in the service of others and stood their ground at the cost of their well-being and even, at times, their lives. They were creators of art, music and literature. Discoverers of advances in science and medicine that have enriched the lives of all people. Philosophers and theologians and great preachers. Leaders of the church who challenged the status quo. Those who gave up promising careers in other fields to become political leaders and seekers of justice in the public sphere. The list goes on. In the opening litany we raised our voices and asked them to pray for us.

We also remember all those in the Communion of Saints who have gone before us. Those disciples of Jesus who served this community or touched in some way the lives of those who now serve it. It is important that we remember them and keep them in our prayers. It is important to remember that we are here because of their devotion. And that our own devotion to following the right path is what keeps the Gospel alive in our own difficult and challenging times. Truth is, we could use a few more saints these days. People who take Jesus seriously and accept the responsibilities of discipleship. Who trust in the promises that the blessings offer. People who are willing to accept their need of God, treat others gently, raise their voices against injustice, practice forgiveness, think with the heart and work for peace.

We may not think we are up for this, but it is important for the voices of the faithful to be heard in these trying times. And we are up to it. In his book, Convictions, How I Learned What Matters Most, Marcus Borg offers this reflection:

I begin with the awareness that we are all vastly improbable. I recall a character in a philosophical novel calculating the improbability of any one of us existing. All of our ancestors all the way back, through the uncountable centuries and millennia when infant mortality rates were very high, had to live to child bearing age in order for any of use to be here. But every one of your and my ancestors made it to adulthood. The odds against any particular one of us being here are spectacularly high. We are all wonders.

I take that to mean we are all a miracle or near miracle at least. And I take that to mean we are here for a reason. We are up to whatever challenge it is because Jesus has already made a claim on our lives and the saints are there ahead of us. We have some purpose, perhaps yet undiscovered, but we have one. The question the Beatitudes leaves us to ponder is how will we respond to that claim? Amen.