

The Beatitudes According to the Saints

All Saints Day, November 1, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

“Blessed are you when people 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 in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

All Saints, the annual festival observed on November 1, is a day to remember fellow believers who have departed this earth and now dwell with the Church Triumphant. Our tradition at St. Luke's and in many congregations is to have a Roll Call of the Saints each All Saints Day when those who died over the past year are remembered. It is like a final committal of our departed into the Lord's care, and another moment to remember and grieve our loss. This is a good practice, but there is more to All Saints. On a happier note, it is a time to be blessed, inspired and guided by the witness of these wonderful believers. The saints have a lot of guidance to offer, and with our Gospel reading being the Beatitudes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, it seemed best to let the saints do the instructing. Some see the Beatitudes as impossibly high standards of Kingdom behavior that we can only admire, but not really do, or at least do consistently, but I will disagree. I have seen the Beatitudes

lived, and you have too. The saints have showed me the way. I thought I would let the saints teach this lesson, and I will be referring to saints both living and departed. If you can think of a saint who lived out a certain Beatitude better than the one I mention, that is wonderful. Let us be inspired by these great examples of faith.

Before looking at Matthew 5, it should first be said that we do not talk about the saints as much as we should. These people can offer so much guidance. What a joy it was a few years ago when Rob Dodds led the Lenten evening gathering with some thoughts on giving and serving, all of which he attributed to Bob Gregory's witness! Bob has been gone for several years, but his witness lives on and his light shines. This is what saints are supposed to do! Who are your mentors, fathers and mothers in faith who have guided and inspired you? If you have stories to tell, then start telling them.

We are very shy about such sharing, and I will admit that there are a few reasons for caution. I like to think of it as the fear of either canonizing or overlooking. Church families can fall into the habit of praising a few people, and only those people, while many other great lives of faith are ignored and forgotten. I call this a little too much adoration and a sad case of blindness. Many congregations have become so enamored of the late "Dear Dr. Smith who was such a warm and wonderful pastor," that they become blind to the many skills and gifts of other pastors who have followed. Remembering the saints does not mean just putting up a few pedestals for the all-time favorites while neglecting the rest. Some of the most inspiring saints came to us in plain brown wrappers, so be sure to look a little deeper! May we not be afraid to share our memories and thoughts about the saints who inspire. We Dutch are known for our emotional reserve, and while we may be very proud of our children, we find ourselves going to great lengths to keep them from knowing this! People are to be affirmed and saints are to be celebrated! Let us get into that habit.

With all of this in mind I want us to take a look at the beloved and familiar Gospel lesson which we know as the Beatitudes. Jesus begins His great Sermon on the Mount by honoring the truly blessed of that realm. By *blessed* Jesus is speaking of those who are truly favored by God, important, and having reason for joy. These words of our Lord are jarring as they speak of those whom our world would often consider losers! But Jesus' teaching resonates within us as we see in these blessed people virtues which are pleasing to God. As I mention folks who have taught me the meaning of Jesus' words, you may be thinking of other saints who taught you the same lesson, and this is wonderful! Let us get into the habit of celebrating saints, and let us start with this look at Matthew 5.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In this rough and tumble world one need not look far to find one who is poor in spirit. I think of an elderly woman named Elva that I used to visit as she was shut-in. Elva was a widow who had

suffered mental illness for most of her life. Her nerves were so bad that her hands and lip would usually quiver. Every task in life was a challenge for Elva, but she marched on. She read her Bible, watched a few television preachers and prayed daily. She hung on to Jesus Christ, for faith in Christ was all that she really seemed to have in life. Elva is now with Christ, and now she knows, deep in her now peaceful heart, that faith really was all that she really needed. A lesson for us all.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Joe and Nancy come to mind when I hear these words, for they lost so much. Joe, who did most of his growing up without a mother or a father, and his first wife Judy were unable to have children, so they adopted a four-year-old daughter. Soon after this Judy contracted a rare illness and died. Joe would meet and marry Nancy. Her father lived with them, on to the age of 103, and when he died Nancy told me how much she missed him. She was a tad offended at those who would remark that "it must be a relief for your father to now be at peace." Some years later their daughter died suddenly while still in her thirties. Joe and Nancy were too familiar with mourning. But one would not know it to meet them or spend any time in their company. Surely, they feel keenly the pain of their losses, but they have also learned that all God's people are to be family and they are not really alone. Joe and Nancy inspire me, and I delight that in time all mourning will have passed and they will be fully comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Helen seemed to be the very picture of meekness (a virtue that nobody seems to really want). She was short, quiet and had a high and slightly squeaky voice. Not what one would consider a commanding presence! We worried about Helen when her husband died. Would she get along? She spoke of some seasonal depression. Was she strong enough? But life moved on for Helen. She moved to a home that she had built to better suit her, and seemed to be getting along quite well. Then came the diagnosis, which was a shock as she was not really so old and had seemed healthy. Helen knew from the beginning that her days were numbered, and we worried again about Helen and her strength to meet the cruelties of life. In a rather matter of fact way she assured me that her Lord had gone through much worse for her than this, and she was confident that God would see her through. She died with a courage and calm which was impressive. How we love to underestimate the meek! Their strength and abilities are so easily overlooked. I also thought of our own Carolyn Fitts who lived her life so humbly. There are no buildings named after Carolyn, and she did not demand attention, but oh how she could graciously serve: a good wife, a great mother, den mother, active Church volunteer and servant! Jesus assures us that these folks are the ones who will truly own the Kingdom! When I think of the meek, I can't help but laugh, but I am not laughing at them! I am laughing at myself. When the Kingdom comes this army of quiet and unassuming souls that pompous preachers and other "important people" so easily overlooked will be running the show! Blessed are the meek!

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. There are those who are always longing for something better, but these are not the complainers of the world. They deeply long to better themselves, especially as they wear the name Christian, and they long for a better world around them. In this pleasant and picturesque town of Lititz, "the Coolest Small Town in America" we may convince ourselves that all is well in this beautiful little burg, but some have better eyesight. I think of Myrtle Snyder who put forth the idea of a free Wednesday lunch. Beyond the quaint scenes of our town, she knew that hunger lurked, and this enemy had to be addressed. She hungered for a better world, free of hunger. Now she can be satisfied.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Julie could always see a need and wanted to do something about it. She was a nurse and saw many needy people in an average day, and as she wanted to fill the needs of a congregation, she also studied the organ and served as assistant organist. She saw youth in our congregation and community in need of guidance and encouragement and freely stepped up to lead a youth group. Vacation Bible School was high on her list of priorities. Julie seemed to be everywhere, leading and serving as was needed. And all this was despite her own health issues which she could have easily used as an excuse to *not* serve, or an opportunity to receive care rather than give it. Julie had been touched by God's mercy and then spent her life passing it on. Her health issues led to a shortened life, but she put more caring and mercy into those years than most could fit into a hundred-year span. Blessed are the merciful!

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Here is where Ray Bushong comes to mind. I did not know Ray well, and did not know him in his prime, but there are two things about Ray which made an impression upon me. He told me of his participation in the Penn Relays as a young man back in the 1930s, which is quite an honor and the sign of a very good runner. During his race he was spiked by a fellow runner. The injury to his calf was significant as the other runner's spikes cut high and deeply. Ray would tell the story, not with a lament of the pain, or even the disappointment of being knocked out of the race, but with a sad amazement that anyone would do such a heartless thing! Though he had been around this world for an awfully long time, Ray was still shocked and saddened by the evils which are so common. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* Ray also demonstrated to me the other side of that Beatitude – the part about seeing God. When I would visit Ray in the nursing home, I usually concluded my time with a reading from the Bible, and as I announced the reading his facial expression would always amaze me. Many will offer a solemn look and some will do their best to act like they are in Church. Ray had the most amazing look on his face as one could see that he was doing all he could to *listen!* He knew that God spoke through the Scriptures, and Ray didn't want to miss any of it. His eyes would focus forward, as if looking beyond. He knew where he was going. Oh, that we all had that kind of focus!

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. I dare not name any names here as I might blow somebody's cover. Even after a mission is over, a peacekeeper is usually unnoticed. They are the one in the family or the work setting that offers warmth and a sense of family, and manages to keep the conflicts from getting out of hand or even being noticed! They are the shock absorbers that make the world a more harmonious place, and they are seldom noticed, and when they do leave some wonder why their world isn't as peaceful as it once was. The loud and opinionated ones always leave their mark, but not the peacemaker! Theirs is a humility that reflects the Master's kindness.

Jesus concludes with a word about the persecuted who with the poor in spirit will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. How blessed we are to be living in a time and nation where we know no such people. Perhaps the closest we come to knowing these folks is to know those tireless workers whose efforts are never appreciated and occasionally criticized.

These are the saints who have taught me the Beatitudes, and I am sure that you have saints of your own recollection which have taught you. Beyond learning Matthew 5 there is a greater moral to this story. Study those saints! These are treasured instructors and encouragers who deserve our attention. As we bid these people farewell, let us pause and remember the gifts they have left us. Nick Bitzer, the night watchman of many years, reminded me of the lessons of vigilance and patience. Brint Rutherford lived a life of ingenuity matched with a warm and caring heart. Perhaps you have listed a name on this day's roll of saints. How has this saint blessed you? Give it much thought!

But now, as we draw to a conclusion, comes the kicker. Let us resolve to do all we can in *our* lives that we can be saints worth imitating. Just a few moments after the Beatitudes Jesus gave the command to *let our lights so shine before people that they will see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven* (5:16). A generation of believers is depending on you as they need your example and encouragement. This call to shine is expressed well in the old Gospel hymn that most of you probably know: "Brighten the Corner Where You Are." Though some may find its style a bit corny it speaks eloquently of our need to do what we can. We may not be superstars for Jesus, but as we do what we are able, we stand as a light which just might save another.

*Do not wait until some deed of greatness you may do,
Do not wait to shed your light afar,
To the many duties ever near you now be true,
Brighten the corner where you are.
Brighten the corner where you are. Brighten the corner where you are.
Someone far from harbor you may guide across the bar,
Brighten the corner where you are.*

A happy All Saints to you all.