

Feast of All Saints– Year A The Beatitudes

It is all upside down. There is no sense in it. Any good laundress will tell you that a garment washed in blood will not come out white, no matter what the author of Revelation says. And we learned in a line often quoted from Camelot, “It’s not the earth the meek inherit; it’s the dirt!” As anyone who listens to the political foray of our day can attest, weakness is not valued, only power and wealth and might.

So what Jesus lays out in this, his inaugural address in Matthew’s Gospel, is a world upside down, a world that makes no sense to a rational mind intent on preserving and building up its own self, its own dominion. For Jesus, these “beatitudes” are a description of the values of the kingdom of God. They are the description of a way of life, the way *to* life in the heart of God. In the same way that Moses went up on the mountain to receive the 10 commandments and then passed them on to the people, Jesus, in today’s Gospel, goes up on the mountain and then passes on to the people what he has heard from God. But while the commandments were mostly proscriptions about what the people were not to do, meant to stop people from lying and stealing and murdering, the word Jesus speaks in these Beatitudes – and in the rest of his teaching – are prescriptions for what we *are* to do, how we *are* to live. And they speak to us about living from our hearts.

Blessed are the pure in heart – the humble – who know the truth that their value lies not in their accomplishments but in God present in them, in God’s life in them. Blessed are those who mourn, because we mourn only when we have loved – and have loved deeply. Blessed are the meek – who know that they are no more or less important than all the others God has created. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – who want what is right for *all*, whether or not it brings gain to them. Blessed are the pure in heart – those whose heart is centered, and who know that at their heart’s center is really only God. Blessed are the peacemakers – not those who never engage, but those engage in the hard work of *making* peace, even in the face of conflict and division. Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness sake, those *doing right*, those living these values at the heart of Jesus the Christ, because they know they *are* the heart and hands of Christ.

And Jesus ends by saying, if you live these values – people may come after you, but that’s how you’ll know you’ve got it right. You’ll know you’ve got it right because they did the same thing to the prophets, and – spoiler alert – they did the same thing to Jesus.

We have this reading on this feast of All Saints because these are the values that we have seen these people we call saints embody in their lives. We do not honor “the saints” because they followed the commandments. We do not honor them because we think they were sinless. They do not wear crowns or white robes that were awarded like stars on a chart in school for having the fewest absences or the most perfect scores. We honor them, we claim them as examples, because they dared to live the values of the One they chose to follow, they dared to live out who they really were.

Because John’s letter tells us very clearly: We are God’s children. We are from the heart of God.

I think we would much prefer simply to be safe, to have salvation be a matter of following the rules and then getting a reward in the hereafter, the crown or robe or harp and cloud. But Jesus tells us again and again that we are meant for more than that. Jesus tells us we are created as more than that. We are created, not for following rules and blindly obeying commands, but for living out as faithfully as we can the expression of God that God breathed into us at our birth. We are created to be saints.

Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk who, from his solitary hermitage wrote books that pricked the conscience of a nation during the Viet Nam War and Civil Rights Movement. In his biography, The Seven Story Mountain, Merton relates a conversation with a friend about what he, Merton, wants to be. When Merton says he wants to be a good Catholic, his friend tells him that he *should* say he wants to be a saint. Merton writes: “I can’t be a saint,” I said, “I can’t be a saint.” **And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities: the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they *must* do, cannot reach the level that they *must* reach: the cowardice that says: “I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin,” but which means, by those words: “I do not want to give up my sins and my attachments.”**

“What hubris!” I hear myself say, when I think of myself saying, “I’m called to be a saint.” But that comes, I think, from the false notion we have that the saints are those who had mystical powers, or special graces, or who were great in some way beyond us. Viewed in this way, saints may be more of a hindrance to us than a help.

Dorothy Day was co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement - opening a shelter for the homeless and speaking out against injustice in all its forms. She was a thorn in the side of the official church, and was accused of being a communist. I’m quoted in the book Making Saints, by Kenneth Woodward, as relating the story of Dorothy Day’s reaction when someone told her she would be considered for sainthood someday. Her response was, “Don’t dismiss me so easily!” As long as Dorothy Day - or Thomas Merton - or Teresa of Avila - or Richard Hooker - or Martin Luther King, Jr. - are “one of us” - then we cannot avoid the awareness that we can - and are called to - do the things they did. But if we make these people “saints” - in the sense that they are somehow more than us - then we are off the hook. It is when we say that “saints” are only others that we engage in Merton’s “false humility which makes [us] say that [we] cannot do the things that [we] *must* do, cannot reach the level that [we] *must* reach: the cowardice that says: “I am satisfied to save my soul..”

We have no idea what effect our lives have on those around us, or who will come after us. But we are all called to be saints, examples of living the values Jesus proclaimed in the beatitudes. And we need others to be those examples to us. I remember very clearly a time when I was in church, struggling - almost to the point of despair - with what I could or could not any longer believe. And I watched an old woman, praying her prayers in one of the front pews. And all that came to me was that if she could be faithful, if she could show up day after day and year after year, then I could at least show up, too. *Her* faithfulness told me that faithfulness was possible for me, too.

In this parish, there are those who have lost and mourned and lived, and now tells other mourners, by their own lives, that there is life after loss. There are those here at St. John’s who live out their conviction that the homeless do not matter less than the wealthy. St. John’s is still here today because of a small “Altar Guild” full of women who held on for dear life with hearts centered on keeping it alive for the generations to come. These, all these, are saints - not because they are or were focused on saving their own souls, but because they were and are living out who they were created to be by God.

Leonard Cohen said, **“A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love.”**

It has *everything* to do with the energy of love, and I do not believe it is a *remote* human possibility. Rather, it is the possibility inherent in who we are, inherent in God who breathed us into being. It is that energy of love that matters. In the end, it is only that energy of Love that matters.

As we prayed in the opening collect:

“Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you.”

May it be so.

[Revelation 7:9-17](#)

[Psalms 34:1-10, 22](#)

[1 John 3:1-3](#)

[Matthew 5:1-12](#)