

Sermon: All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2017 – Matthew 5: 1-12
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
 Blessed are those who mourn,
 Blessed are the meek,
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
 Blessed are the merciful,
 Blessed are the pure in heart,
 Blessed are the peacemakers,
 Blessed are those who are persecuted,
 Blessed are you when people revile you.

If I were coming from outside the Christian faith, and this was the first thing I heard about Jesus and the concept of blessedness, one question would come to mind almost immediately: “if these are the ones who are blessed, what would it look like to be cursed?” For from any sensible, what-I-hope-for approach to life, these nine categories are hardly the things that one would aspire to. I mean, “mourning” rather than living without loss? Persecuted? Reviled? Meek/Humble/Humbled/Humiliated? Impoverished, either fiscally or spiritually? While each of these is said to have a positive resolution in future – those who mourn will be comforted, the meek shall inherit the earth – the starting state is so challenging, that it is scarcely the kind of thing you would put on a promotional poster for the way of Jesus.

And yet... these are the words before us, as we mark the annual festival of All Saints. And that context – a time when we pause to give thanks for the departed whose influence and witness has shaped our lives – gives us one way to approach the beatitudes. This unusual, difficult list of qualities, which most of us would recoil from, have been embraced by some truly exceptional people as their guiding principles, and for that they are well-remembered.

Kathryn Turner, a Roman Catholic author in the UK picks up on this intersection between the hard words of the Beatitudes, and the people who choose to let their lives be shaped by them:

“as the poetry and rhythm of beautiful images of Kingdom living and the fruits it bears flow into our heads - we can find ourselves lulled into a sense of security that this is how life is going to be. But there is a sting in the tale. Jesus - as we have seen before - is a realist. He knows that the world is not yet ready for people who live according to [these] Kingdom principles. He knows that all too often those who hunger and thirst for what is right will be disappointed - those who are gentle will be exploited - those who are merciful cannot expect mercy to be shown them - and those who mourn often have very good reason to, and cannot expect comfort. And so He concludes with words that seem hard - but are realistic - and, in fact, are a source of strength and comfort.”

She continues, “Jesus is pointing out a simple truth - one that His own life - and death bore testimony to...The world cannot handle Kingdom people. But He reassures His listeners - and us: even when the world hates you for living as a Kingdom person - or ridicules you - or exploits you - even then, remember that you are blest by God. Those are the very times when you can be most sure that you are living according to the values of heaven and bringing them into the world...”

And so, on this “All Saints” Sunday, we remember with gratitude persons who have taken up this hard challenge, embracing their identity as God’s blessed ones: famous people and people known only to us, people with big flamboyant personalities and those who toiled in the shadows, each in their own way living faithful lives that made a difference to others; and a bit later in the service, we will have an opportunity to offer up their memories and their names in prayer.

Some of these people were well aware of the impact they were making – perhaps because people did thank them for their contributions, or perhaps because of how broadly reviled they were by people uninterested in the kinds of changes they were trying to make. Many, however, would be shocked that their actions were even noticed, let alone regarded as influential.

Lutheran author Nadia Bolz-Weber, Pastor of “House for All Sinners and Saints” in Denver, Colorado, has written a book entitled *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*, and she writes of this “who, me?” aspect of sainthood (pp.6-8):

“It has been my experience that what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God’s ability to work through sinners. The title ‘saint’ is always conferred, never earned....I have come to realize that *all* the saints I’ve known have been accidental ones – people who inadvertently stumbled into redemption like they were looking for something else at the time, people who have just a wee bit of a drinking problem and manage to get sober and help others do the same, people who are as kind as they are hostile.

“What we celebrate in the saints is not their piety or perfection but the fact that we believe in a God who gets redemptive and holy things done in this world through, of all things, human beings, all of whom are flawed.”

And with these words, the notion of sainthood expands. Yes, some people have done truly outstanding things and changed the world, but they are first and foremost *people*: human beings with strengths and weaknesses, with courageous actions and cowardly avoidances, proud moments and pratfalls. What unifies the saints is not some super-human perfection, but their very human reliance on the gracious presence of the God whose name is Love. And as we humanize our understanding of the saints, we may even start to see that Christ’s call through the beatitudes is not just to someone else; Christ may very well be speaking to me, and you, and the person beside you and in front of you and behind you, and the first person you speak to when you leave this place, to reach out in a way that may well change someone’s life. The call to embrace Christ’s understanding of blessedness, is to all of us.

Yet there remains for me a disconnect, because the very things that Jesus speaks of in positive, hopeful terms, are things we are trained to avoid. We are taught how to seek a competitive edge, we rightly teach our daughters and sons how not to be steamrollered by others, and no number of participants’ trophies (“yay, we finished seventh”) can dull the knowledge of how great it feels when our team wins the championship. Yet there it is: blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemaker. Jesus is proposing for us a way that is nothing short of counter-cultural, and he knows it, for it was as contrary to the patterns of his day, as it is to ours.

Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal leader in Seattle, offers a fresh look at the Beatitudes that I find particularly helpful. She would agree with those who translate the Greek word *makarios*, which begins each line of the beatitudes, as “honoured” or “esteemed” rather than “blessed” or “happy.” She also notes, that the path advocated by Jesus was so radical that his first followers had to leave behind many of their usual friendships and supports in order to take up this new way of life. With these two ideas in hand, she writes:

“In the New Testament world, the esteem you commanded was in large part a function of how important your connections were -- your family members, your patrons, and your clients. If you were...part of a very important family, you were important. If your family was less important, you were less important. If you weren't connected to others, that didn't make you [‘self-made’ or ‘ruggedly independent’]; it made you a *nobody*. That's serious stuff, because nobody wants to do business with a *nobody*; being pushed out of your network of social relationships could also mean being left with nothing to live on and no way to get out of that position.

“Jesus gathers in all of these people who have are completely bereft and without honor in their culture’s eyes, and ...ascribes honor to them, declaring that these are the people whom the God of Israel honors. Their human [networks] may have disowned them, but they are children of the God who created the universe, to whom all honor belongs.

Think of this for a moment: these words of blessing, which began the Sermon on the Mount, are not just ironic, counter-cultural words; they are words that probe the lives of those who gathered around Jesus, and with these words he honoured them. In addition to those who had lost some degree of community support by deciding to follow Jesus, the crowd would also have contained many people who were already at the bottom of society’s pecking order, people who heard Jesus say, “blessed are the meek” and thought, “that means me.” There would have been people whose spirits were low, or who carried burdensome grief, or who were constantly being put down and limited, and to these people who wanted

and needed transformation Jesus said: God is with you; the seeds of blessing live in you at this moment and will, I promise, bloom to glorious flower. And in that same crowd, I surmise, there may also have been folks who had not been quite so beaten-down, who had endeavoured to build their lives around words like peacemaker, merciful, or seekers after righteousness; and to them, Jesus offered encouragement to stay the course, for these priorities are held gently in the palm of God's hand.

In the beatitudes, then, in addition to stating a lofty ideal, Jesus also saw his audience for who they were: those who were told by the world that their lives weren't worth much – the poor, the poor in spirit, the reviled; and spiritual questers, those who understood a concept given words many centuries later by the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."

Especially in the earliest years of Christianity, when it was still more of a movement and less of an institution, those most eager to follow Jesus were those who were constantly slamming into life's barriers and boundaries: slaves and servants, foreigners, women, free thinkers. In the very first words of his first big sermon, Jesus recognized these people, and honoured them. Just by saying these words out loud, Jesus said to them, and to you, that you've been seen, identified, known by God as one of those people who wants to go further in living a life that is full, good, worthy, and that the process leading to those good things is already under way. At points in my life when my spirits have been low, when anxiety or depression have had the upper hand, that sense of Christ's activity in my life, God's unfolding purpose which I embrace but is not of my making, has been nothing short of a life-saver.

These words of unexpected honouring affirm that Jesus "gets it" – that those who are most aware of their shortcomings have great potential to understand the power of love. Jesus shows up in our lives, not at the end of a program of self-improvement, but in the midst of our brokenness: our exclusion, our grief, our thirst for a righteousness that is beyond us. And these words are not merely designed to lift our spirits, but to look around for others needing to know that they, too, are loved and honoured by God: to meet those who are not particularly honoured by the dominant culture, and say "our home is your home." For these words are not just intended to encourage individuals to "be their best selves"; *these words define who we are to be as a people* – what kind of community we are to be as a congregation, as a denomination, as disciples of Christ Jesus. It's why we continue to gather in Christ's name even when there are other things we could do on a Sunday morning, and it's why we've embarked on the Affirming Process here at Ralph Connor, to go deep into what it would mean to invite and truly include all people – of all sexual orientations, of all cultural backgrounds, all educational levels, all levels of physical ability or disability – to enrich this family. The beatitudes both honour and bless those who are not well-served by the systems of society, and place in our midst a picture of a new way of being, where the last and the lost and the least join together in our shared humility, knowing the glory of God's unshakeable love which does not rise and fall with the tides of public opinion.

In these words of blessing and honour, Jesus places before us the hope of a new reality that has in some senses already begun, and yet clearly still "in progress" – the home of the humble and the merciful and the peacemaker. May these words shape our commemoration of the saints who have gone before us, our attitude toward the world around us, and our own sense of being a community of Christ's own belovedness.

And in that spirit, I direct you to the back of your bulletin, for a special Litany for All Saints....

References cited: © 2017 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church

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