

All Saints' Sunday, Year C – Luke 6:20-31
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ

Hope-filled Community

Blessings and woes. Blessings and woes. On this All Saints' Day, we hear Luke's version of the Beatitudes as we remember and celebrate the saints of the early church, and those beloved ones -- and maybe not so beloved ones -- that have gone before us. Perhaps we are listening with hopefulness that we will hear something new in the Scriptures; something that will help carry us through these tender moments of gratitude and melancholy. In listening to Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, his followers are eager to hear words of encouragement and inspiration. But on this day, Jesus' words sound comforting to some and challenging to others. And perhaps they prompt us to wonder if we are among the blessed or woeful.

In most circumstances, we are grateful to be blessed, and we avoid being filled with woe.

But in this teaching, Jesus seems to be blessing people who are poor, whose stomachs are not currently satisfied, whose hearts are sad, and who are excluded from their community. Jesus seems to be warning those who are currently rich, and happy, and respected that a reversal of fortune is pending. Again, such an interpretation is comforting to some and unsettling to others. But Jesus' message isn't intended to pit some of his followers against the others now or in the distant future. Jesus is creating a vision of community

that is intended for all of his listeners – those who are ardent followers, as well as those who are curious, and even those who are a bit skeptical or resentful.

The people who are following Jesus are both rich and poor, privileged and oppressed; and he is speaking to all of them. Jesus is planting seeds in the minds of all of his listeners about what the kingdom of God looks like in the heavenly realm that they are used to imagining, as well as the heavenly realm that is currently in their midst.

What Jesus is advocating is extremely countercultural. He is preaching about values that do not align with their current life experiences. And yet, there is hope. Hearts are warming, imaginations are sparked. New possibilities are considered.

After hearing Jesus' Sermon on the Plain it won't be long before his followers become part of the feeding of the five thousand. And people will wonder – did Jesus make all that bread? Or did some of the more well-to-do folks have extra bread, and then suddenly felt compelled to share it with those who had none? After hearing the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus continues teaching and healing. He listens to the pleas of people with much power and authority, as well as those with none. A centurion's highly valued slave is healed as well as a widow's son. Jesus' message of love, and kindness, and mercy is for all people, in all circumstances. It is a message about God's

beloved people working together to create God's beloved community now and in the age to come.

As lovely and idealistic as that may sound, Jesus realizes that there is much awareness to be raised, and work to be done for God's reign to be more fully realized in this earthly realm. We get a glimpse of what Jesus has in mind when he asks his followers to love their enemies, to do good to those who hate you, to bless those who curse you, and to pray for those who abuse you. A couple of those directives sound easier than others if we are to manage them alone. But Jesus is not asking us to do anything all by ourselves. He is asking us to lift up those people who have hurt us, or whom we have hurt and ask God to support us in healing and reconciliation. Jesus is asking us to not only lift up our enemies in prayer, but to work together to create conditions in which opportunities for mercy and justice outweigh those for retaliation.

Unfortunately, some have heard parts of Jesus' message and lifted them out of context to use for their own benefit. They've heard the part about praying for those who abuse you, and turning one cheek and offering the other as if God were giving abusers permission to continue behaving badly; as if God wanted some of his beloved people to be victims of oppression, torture, and violence. Some people have carved out parts of Scripture to defend hateful and abusive behavior.¹ But thankfully many other people have

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4256

stepped forward and spoken out about this misinterpretation of Scripture. They have reminded us all that we are to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And more importantly, what we must love our neighbors as God loves us. In hearing and responding to the fullness of the Gospel message, Jesus offers woes alongside blessings that we may become more aware and alert to our role as agents in realizing God's heavenly realm.² "Jesus demands that his followers not simply wait for some heavenly utopia, but actively work with him now to establish God's loving, kind, and merciful rule."³

Now is the time for compassion. Now is the time for generosity. Now is the time for forgiveness and reconciliation. Now is the time for mercy and justice. Not some humanly convoluted version of mercy and justice in which we judge others with a miserly spirit and suspicious heart. But the kind of mercy and justice we have received over and over from God, when we least expect it, and some might even say, when we least deserve it. But God's grace is never "deserved." It is always freely given in extravagant abundance. We know this from personal experiences, because we have been blessed by God's grace through the actions of saints who are still living, and saints who have gone before us.⁴ We know this because others have expressed their gratitude when we have been there for them. We know this, because we have gotten out

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=816

³ F. Scott Spencer. *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press (2008), 144.

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=816

of some unexpectedly sticky situations, and others have been rescued from dire circumstances. We know this whether we have read about their saintly lives in history books or in newspapers, whether we have heard about them from our own teachers or from stories shared over generations. And we know this because some of those saints are friends and family members. And some are even strangers who seem to have showed up at just the right place, and at just the right time. They may be saintly people who don't exactly fit the perfect image of saints we've admired so often in museums or public squares.

But the saints of long ago were just as imperfect as we are. Some saints were followers, who betrayed Jesus in his darkest hour, only to become some of his greatest advocates after his death and resurrection. Some like us, who have been baptized into Christ and declared righteous by grace are, in fact living saints of God, even when we don't always act like it. Perhaps in sharing his blessings and woes, Jesus is directing us to evaluate on a regular basis how we are living into our sainthood, not just for our personal lives but as a community of the faithful.

A few weeks ago Bishop Steven Charleston wrote, ""I have been working on my autobiography. Not writing it, but living it. I have decided that I need some more humor in the book so I am intentionally cheering up and laughing more. I want a chapter with a lot of adventure in it, so I am planning to do a

few things I have always wanted to do but never gotten around to.”⁵ In this instance, Bishop Charleston’s focus was on his personal life, but I imagine that he was also alluding to the fact that if we decide that we need some more saints in the world, we can intentionally be saints. If we decide we need some more compassion and kindness in the world, we can be more saintly with one another. If we want to experience more of God’s mercy and justice in the world, then we can listen for God’s prompting, be alert to the Spirit’s guidance, and follow Jesus’ teaching in being blessed by being blessings to one another.

May the comfort and challenge of being blessed and woeful graciously transform our lives, that all of us may come to share in the communion of saints as God’s eternally Beloved Community.

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⁵ Facebook page: Native America/Indigenous Ministries of the Episcopal Church, post by Bishop Steven Charleston, October 23, 2019.