Twenty-Second Sunday After Trinity (All Saints Day)

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Rev. Dcn. Skip Sopscak

All Saints Anglican Church of Traverse City

I don't have the exact statistics but I feel there is compelling anecdotal evidence that "All Saints" is among the most, if not the most, popular church names in our denomination. And being one ourselves, that makes the relatively rare opportunity to celebrate a Sunday All Saints Day service all the more special. So what does All Saints Day mean to us as Reformed Christians? The 22nd of The Articles of Religion, found at the end of our Book of Common Prayer, identifies, among other things, Invocation of Saints as "repugnant to the Word of God." That theological principle is reflected in the Prayer Book's included Saint's Days being limited to only those that are biblical figures. We honor them but do not pray to them or ask them for prayers on our behalf. In keeping with our collect for All Saints Day, we as Anglicans praise God for having knit together His "elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of [His] Son Christ our Lord" and pray for "grace so to follow [His] blessed Saints in all virtuous and godly living".[1] We honor all those who went before us and aspire to follow their good example and join them in the fellowship and communion of All Saints.

In our Gospel Reading today (Matthew 5:1-12) Jesus gives us the basic aspirational qualities of discipleship, the attributes of sainthood fully developed only with God's grace. This is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus separates his Disciples from the crowds that have been gathering because of his miracles, and teaches them foundational tenets of the Kingdom of God. The entire sermon spans three whole chapters of Matthew's Gospel: 5, 6, and 7. There is disagreement as to whether the depiction by St. Matthew of a comprehensive sermon is that of an actual single event or a compilation of teachings repeated over time. Jesus must have taught these things repeatedly over the course of His ministry, and indeed much of the same teaching is depicted at various times and places throughout the other synoptic gospels. Luke gives us what is known as the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49) which is shorter, containing many of the same sayings, yet some unique. It seems plausible that the Gospel writers, in these two sermons have given us accounts of actual discrete events. The objection that Jesus could not, as a practical matter, spend enough time to effectively teach all that the Sermon on the Mount contains at

[1] John H. Rogers, *The 39 Articles of Religion: A Commentary With Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Anglican House Media Ministry, 2015), Art. 22 Of Purgatory, Kindle.

once, sells our Lord short. Especially given the account of the Feeding of the Four Thousand (Matthew 15:32-39 Mark 8:1-10) in which a single such effort spanned three days and necessitated a miraculous compounding of food. In any case, we needn't dwell on the question "since nothing of great importance" depends on it.[2]

Jesus sat down on a slope and his disciples gathered at his feet. This was the traditional posture of a Rabbi and his students, "And he opened his mouth, and taught them." Which echoes Psalm 78: "I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old." (Psalms 78:2) He begins by describing the attributes needed for discipleship, the qualities we should reflect on and cultivate in ourselves in order to follow the example of our Lord. To be clear, these are aspirational, our only hope in attaining them is through God's grace and they will only be fully realized in the world to come.

They are each delivered in the form of a beatitude, a word derived from the Latin *beati* which is used in the Vulgate to translate the greek *makarios*, the first word of the many beatitudes appearing in the Bible. The well-known Hebrew idiom rendered in English as "Blessed is/are he/they that ..." appears throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the Psalms. But nowhere do so many appear together, enumerated as they are here.[3] It is not blessed in the sense of a blessing by God. We can think of it like "Fortunate is ..." or, literally, "Happy is ..." happy taken as a state of life rather than an emotional state. It's an exclamation of congratulations. The form of the teaching here is so simple, yet so dense, it is a little mind-boggling. On first encountering them and long after, I found them perplexing. What is a reader of contemporary sensibility to make of the suggestion that "happy is he who is destitute" or "happy is he that is deeply saddened by the death of a loved one"? In a culture that celebrates boldness and self-assertiveness, "happy are the meek" sounds absurd. Whenever we find apparent contradictions in the Bible, we can be assured there is something of importance to learn. Each beatitude has been interpreted in a variety of ways and I think they are intended to have layers of meaning. Let's look at each in turn as qualities meant to be cumulative and complementary in the ideal disciple or Saint.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:3) Over-attachment to wealth is a well-documented impediment in the Bible and some of the early church fathers interpreted this as praise for those who choose poverty as opposed to those impoverished by circumstance. Or as Bishop Robert Baron put it, "How lucky you are if you are not addicted to

[2] Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024), 194.
[3] R. T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 113.

material things."[4] But this also refers to literal *spiritual* poverty. The realization that our spirit is destitute and desperately in need of God. It is the ultimate humility to acknowledge that we are incapable of anything good without his help, our utter neediness of His grace.

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4) Even in the ordinary sense, if we consider that true mourning is only made possible by having loved something or someone, which in this world will inevitably be lost, we can start to get at the meaning here. Again Bishop Baron gives us a pithy interpretation: "How lucky you are if you are not addicted to good feelings."[5] We have a clear sense that there can be beauty and joy in sorrow. Just imagining Michelangelo's Pieta, his depiction in marble of Mother Mary holding Jesus' body after the crucifixion, puts me in danger of weeping. I can't think of many works of art more beautiful than that. Which points to a deeper mourning, that of sin, not only our own but that of others and for the whole the world. The sin that makes that crucifixion necessary. Think of Samuel mourning Saul after he's rejected by God for his disobedience. (1 Samual 15:35). Or, "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law." (Psalm 119:34) Those who mourn for the sins of the whole world will ultimately be comforted by reconciliation with God through our Lord and Savior and an eternity in His presence.

"Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5) Meekness does not sound like virtue to a contemporary ear. But the meaning of the greek word used here, *praus* was a gentleness and humility that implies restraint and moderation or self control. The church fathers viewed someone actually meek by nature not to be worthy of praise so much as the man who restrains his anger and reserves it for the right situations. And taking it a step further, it means having the humility to depend not on *self* control but that of God.[6] Promoting not one's own cause, but that of God. So while in this fallen world the earth is taken by and subject to bold, haughty men, that of the world to come will be the inheritance of the meek.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." (Matthew 5:6) Daniel Doriani points out in his commentary on Matthew that "Hunger and thirst is a dead metaphor in a prosperous land."[7] It's important for us to realize that we've probably not once experienced the kind of thirst or hunger that was common place in Jesus' time and place. Discipleship entails the same intense desire for righteousness that a starving man has for a morsel of food. Or a man dying of thirst has for a sip of water. And those suffering so intensely the deprivation of God's righteousness, as fallen men in this fallen world, will not receive just a morsel or a sip.

[4] Robert Barron, in *The Word On Fire Bible: The Gospels*, ed. Brandon Vogt, (Park Ridge, IL: The Word On Fire Ministries, 2020), 51.
[5] Barron, *The Word On Fire Bible: The Gospels*, 51.
[6] William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1958), 92
[7] Daniel M. Doriani, *ESV Expository Commentary*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol 8 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 340.

They will be filled. As our Epistle today concludes, "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more.... For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters". (Revelation 7:16-17)

"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy." (Matthew 5:7) This is a recurring lesson throughout the Gospels: God is merciful but to receive his mercy we must be be merciful to our fellows. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." (Matthew 6:12)

"Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." (Matthew 5:8) Those who mourn sin will long to be free of it. Purity in the sense of sinlessness is impossible for us to achieve in this world. Pure in heart might also be thought of as single-mindedness, a focus on God and our love of Him. In this sense, it leads us to do not only the right thing, but for the right reasons. It can be seen essentially as following the greatest commandment: to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and all with all our mind. And ultimately, they will have "washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God." (Revelation 7:14-15). They shall see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9) This fallen world is characterized by nothing more than conflict and strife. Everywhere from the battle field to the church meeting. We notice that this beatitude doesn't congratulate mere peacefulness. What characterizes the disciple is not a passive quality, but an active one. Injury is forgiven and forgotten. How pleasing to God is a person able to promote calm and cooperation, to soothe others' disquiet. At the end of this service we'll pray for "The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding". God, the ultimate maker of peace will call the peacemakers His children.

"Blessed art they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10) How do we know if we're on the the right path to discipleship? We can expect the worldly to extract a price from us. Like hunger and thirst, we are unlikely to know the kind of persecution mentioned here. It's hard to overstate the hardships faced by early Christians for upholding their faith. Alas, we have brothers and sisters in Africa today subject to similar violence and death. As contemptuous of Christianity as Western culture is today, we're unlikely to suffer much more than mockery and possible loss of friendships or opportunities. But if our faith isn't costing us something in this world, we've likely got some work to do.

So let us remember and honour all the saints that went before us. To emulate their good examples of discipleship. And to reflect on the beatitudes and how we can cultivate those qualities in ourselves. As we'll sing later in our closing hymn:

> Jesus, thy name we bless, and humbly pray that we
> May follow them in holiness, Who lived and died for thee.
> AMEN.