

Sermon on Matthew 5:1-12 & Revelation 7:9-17
Feast of All Saints, Sunday, November 2, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from our God, who is present with us today, and always. Amen.

It is always interesting to me that the Feast of All Saints falls midway between our last celebration of Easter and the next – six months following the Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord. It comes towards the end of the fall season, as the days grow shorter and night comes sooner, as we approach the winter solstice. When Easter comes we have just begun the season of spring, as days grow longer and we become more hopeful, especially here in Minnesota as we look forward to sunshine, melting snow and warmer days ahead. These days around All Saints seem to have a darker mood, as the days become shorter and colder, less hopeful perhaps, if your moods are driven by the weather or the snow!

Both the feasts of All Saints and Easter Sunday are focused on death and resurrection – but they come from such different perspectives. On Easter Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead – on the third day of his execution on a cross, following a 40-day season of Lenten reflection and (for some) fasting. Some of you are absolutely giddy! Or perhaps you are just high on sugar. On that day we break out into joyful song, like *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, as it is a time for feasting, and the release of pent-up emotions around sin and suffering, and the break out of new life – a promise for us which is made real by God's act in raising Jesus from his cold, dark tomb. We sing happy songs of joy that day. If someone were to come to worship only on Christmas morning or Easter Sunday, they would say, "Oh, what joyful, happy people Christians are!" They don't know the whole story, do they? They should stick around for an entire year! Or at least for one Holy Week!

Today on the feast of All Saints we approach resurrection from the other side of death and what we have lost – trying to hear the promise of life in the midst of grief, suffering and pain. I know what it's like. I lost my father last March, a few weeks before Easter, and I sat with him, watching him die. But I was blessed in that experience. I'm not alone in this; many of you today have had this same experience this year. Since we last celebrated the Feast of All Saints in 2016, we have lost several brothers and sisters in Christ: Lucille Belmonte, Dorothea Heumann, Ginny Johnson, Rhynda Landt, Lynn Schibonski, Luella Scott – and today, Claire Davis - plus many other beloved saints whom you have named in our service sheet today. It's a different mood than Easter, isn't it? We begin with a different hymn, a somber litany of saints in which we ask for God's mercy and

grace. But the ultimate message is the same: we have hope because of our faith in the God who has raised Jesus from the dead – who, even when we cannot see God, we trust that God is with us, present in our sorrows and tears, our hopes and our fears, to bless us with comfort and love. Even as our grief remains. For grief doesn't go away the day after the funeral. It hangs around, with memories of the loved one we have lost.

Blessing. What is it? What good is it? To be blessed by God doesn't keep pain away, or keep you or your loved ones from getting sick or dying. This is a common complaint, found in biblical laments. When we say "God bless you" when you sneeze, what does it mean? It doesn't seem to be a tangible power to make something happen. But it means so much to you and me to be blessed, whether it is by a loved one, a parent, or by God. It has something to do with our *trust in God's presence in our world, even when we can't see it.*

Consider the gospel for today: a beloved passage from Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew's gospel known as *The Beatitudes*. In each verse, Jesus tells how God blesses human beings, in many of life's common challenges and situations. But as Jesus shares them, we see that these are situations in which most people would not be considered "happy" or "blessed". For most often we consider people "blessed" by God when they enjoy good health, freedom from suffering, an abundance of wealth and privilege, happiness in their families. This is what the people in Jesus' day considered a blessing, and it's the same today. When you live faithfully, and follow the "rules" – God will bless you. Then when someone becomes suddenly wealthy, we may consider them very lucky – they won the lottery! Some would use the word "blessed by God". Some ministers even preach that wealth is a tangible blessing of God, and try to prove it with biblical texts – it is called the "gospel of wealth". I happen to believe that this is heresy. And here's why: Jesus doesn't preach it. In fact, Jesus teaches just the opposite. Jesus takes our common assumptions about blessing, and turns them upside down! Just listen: *"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. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is*

great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before them. This may not sound like a blessing, but there it is!

As is often the case with familiar scripture, we are so used to these words of Jesus, that sometimes they lose their power with us. Like, “*The Savior is born*” and “*Christ is risen!*” don’t seem so revolutionary any more, right? Truth is, the beatitudes are a reminder from Jesus of God’s constant presence, EVEN in those times of grief, when we think that God is far away, or couldn’t possibly be near.

Like how God is near to those who lost loved ones in Las Vegas in that mass shooting two weeks ago. God is near to those whose loved ones were senselessly killed while riding their bikes in New York City last week. Or whose sons have been shot on the street. God is near to those who lost so much in the hurricane destruction in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Florida or Texas. *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* God is near, and comforts them through those whom God sends to provide comfort and aid. That’s us, by the way.

Jesus speaks of those who are never included among those who typically enjoy power – such as the poor, the humble and the meek. Like our neighbors who do not have documents that give them safety – DACA students, migrant workers, children who have lived here all their lives, or those whose visas have expired, now living in fear of deportation. *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* Really? It’s unimaginable to us, but this is the promise of the gospel.

This great reversal of “the way things are” – to God’s promised future of justice and mercy - should amaze us more than it does. Maybe we think it is just for some far-off day in the future, when Christ comes again, and so we get used to the abuse of power, injustice, hatred, discrimination, sexual harassment and expect nothing today. A harmless blessing changes nothing. But Jesus has a much different view, in which God calls us to mercy, justice and peace TODAY. Jesus says “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*” “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*” Because God is very much present today, calling you and me, and all the faithful by the Spirit, empowering and inspiring us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God – for the sake of your neighbor, out of love. When you speak and act in the spirit and name of Jesus, then others can see how God is present in the world. That changes everything. This is why we hold house meetings: to hear one another’s stories of pain, and respond with words of blessing and acts of love and mercy.

So today, you and I are reminded that we are blessed by God, even in the midst of suffering and death. It won’t always be like this. We await that day promised in the book of Revelation, when that “*great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, stand before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their*

hands...saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Because in these days we have more promised blessings to add to Jesus' list.
*"Blessed are those who cannot afford to be sick, for they will be healed.
Blessed are those who have been abused in their homes or workplaces, for they shall be vindicated.
Blessed are those who live in fear of deportation, for they will find a home.
Blessed are those who have been excluded by their race, religion, sexual orientation or identity, for they all shall be called children of God."*

In the meantime, you and I and other living people of faith, imperfect as we are, are the only saints God has to make the Father's love a reality in this world. You are God's witnesses of love amidst the strife, the cruelty, the sin and the suffering. So we take our hope from these other words of John in our second lesson, who wrote this in the second century to a remnant church that had been divided by schism, ostracized, excluded, and left alone in a world of persecution. But they were set apart as an example of love for one another. John writes: *"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when God [in Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."* Thanks be to God. Amen.