

All Saints' Sunday A 2017
November 5, 2017 :: Matthew 5: 1-12
Fr. Jim Cook

“You Can Be Someone’s Saint!”

The first four chapters of Matthew’s gospel, while filled with interesting bits and pieces here and there, are merely the preparation for what began in today’s gospel reading: Jesus’ first public address, something we call the Sermon on the Mount.

And this morning we heard the first section of that sermon, a passage called the Beatitudes; familiar to probably everybody; likely on everyone’s list of favorite passages of scriptures; and something we hear every year on All Saints’ Day.

But I’m going to make a confession: I wasn’t always a big fan of the Beatitudes. Oh, sure, at first blush they sound lovely. But if you really paid attention to what was being said, they sounded, well, a little nuts. At least to my ears.

For example, some of the Beatitudes begin like this:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,”

and,

“Blessed are those who mourn,”

and,

“Blessed are those who are persecuted.”

Some of the newer translations have substituted “happy” for “blessed,” apparently thinking that it’s a better translation. But here’s the thing: I don’t care whether you use “blessed” or “happy,” because, to me, being described as “poor in spirit,” or being counted among “those who mourn,” or being “persecuted” sounds like just the opposite of being either “blessed” or “happy.” Am I right?

Now, to be fair, I know that each Beatitude has a second part that supposed to explain why that particular group of people is supposed to be “blessed” or “happy,” but, honestly, do things really add up?

I mean, does the promise of a reward, at some undisclosed time in the future, really sound satisfying if, right now, I'm poor in spirit, or mourning, or being persecuted? Not so much! And so, all this makes me think that we're dealing with a problem of translation; and that we need to dig a little bit deeper, and see if we can figure out what's really going on.

Several years ago, I read an amazing scholarly article about the Sermon on the Mount. And — long story short — the author of the article argued persuasively that the author of Matthew's gospel used Psalm 1 as a sort of template for the Sermon on the Mount, and Psalm 1, *verse* 1, specifically, as a template for the Beatitudes.

To demonstrate his point, the article's author first translated Psalm 1:1 in the usual way:

“Blessed is the one who walks not in the way
of the wicked but in the way of the Lord.”

And then, the author explained that the Hebrew word translated as “blessed,” literally means to “find the right road.” Therefore, a

more accurate translation of Psalm 1:1 should probably look something like this:

“You are on the right road when you walk not in the way of unrighteousness, but in the way of the Law of God.”

And then, the author went on to suggest that, if the word “Blessed” in Psalm 1:1 really has the meaning of “you’re on the right road,” then perhaps the word “Blessed” in the Beatitudes also has that same meaning (since the first is the template for the second).

And so, instead of Jesus saying (as we heard this morning):

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”;

maybe what he’s actually saying is:

“You’re on the right road, even if you are poor in spirit, because the kingdom of heaven is yours.”

Now, if we took a minute to think about the wider culture to which Jesus was speaking, this new suggested translation (*i.e.*, “you’re on the right road”) actually begins to sound like a better and more sensible translation.

You see, Jesus’ ministry was conducted in a culture that celebrated wealth, power, and success (and, honestly, which culture doesn’t?). But they celebrated them because they thought they were God’s rewards for living a good life; while the poor and destitute were being punished by God for living a bad life.

And yet, during his public ministry, it was to the poor and destitute, to the marginalized and outcast — to people who were being given the message that God had turned his back on them — it was they to whom Jesus reached out.

And so, when Matthew has Jesus delivering his first sermon, it begins with words addressed to people who think that God has abandoned them. And the first words out of his mouth, though recorded as the Beatitudes, are words that essentially say something to the effect of this:

“Even though you’ve been told the exact opposite, I’m here to say to you that, even though you feel helpless or hopeless, and even though you mourn or are being persecuted, you’re on the right road. You are on God’s road, and God has a special place in his heart for people just like you.”

And understood in this way, the Beatitudes are beginning to sound like good news. Because they serve the purpose of telling people who think they’re worth nothing — because that’s what they’ve been told all along — that they’re actually worth everything to God.

Now, if you’re wondering what any of this has to do with All Saints’ Day, I’ll tell you. For a very long time, three people have always been at the top of my personal list of saints. And the thing is, I doubt if any of them ever thought of themselves as being saints at all; and all of them could easily have thought that God had abandoned them. But, for me, they were saints.

First, there was Gene (Sloan). Gene was something of an outsider; he was different. But when we met, I was feeling like an outsider myself, and so we naturally hit it off. We met a church youth group, and were good friends through high school and college. But after college, I moved away and lost touch with Gene.

When I got word that Gene had committed suicide, I went to the funeral and nosed about, trying to figure out what had happened. What I gleaned was that Gene was gay, and that when he decided to come out of the closet, that news was not welcomed by either his family or church. *(Pause)* And when it turns out that the people who are supposed to love and accept you don't, well, I suppose Gene didn't think he had any other option.

And so, Gene is one of my saints because he reminds me that, just as God's love knows no bounds, neither should ours.

And then there was Becky (Bixler). If Gene was an outsider, Becky was definitely an insider, but I doubt that she ever thought of herself in those terms. She was a talented musician, singer, and dancer. She had a kind heart and gentle spirit. But there was also a kind of vulnerability to her; a kind of fragility.

I met Becky at the Bible study I attended while in college. Over the course of time, Becky met and fell in love with a young man who joined our Bible study, and they eventually married and moved away. What none of us knew was that the man she married had significant psychological problems (*Pause*) and, one day, he killed her.

And so, Becky is one of my saints because she reminds me that, sometimes, unconditional love entails risk.

And, finally, there is Kay (Campbell). I really didn't know Kay all that well. She was a member of a large youth group that I led back when I was living in Dallas. But what I do remember best about Kay was her smile; it could light up a room. I didn't know her parents because they didn't go to church. But Kay came with a friend, and she took to youth group like a fish to water.

And so, when I got the phone call informing me that Kay had killed herself, I really couldn't believe it. And so, and like with Gene, I went to her funeral and snooped around as best I could, seeing if I could figure out what was going on. And the information that seemed to have the most traction was that Kay

had been an ongoing victim of molestation. (*Pause*) And, apparently for Kay, death was the only avenue of escape.

And so, Kay is one of my saints because she reminds me that, sometimes people suffer without letting us know, and therefore we need to take great care with all people.

So, what's the takeaway be from all this?

Well, the Beatitudes remind us that Jesus was telling people who didn't think they mattered at all to God, that, in fact, they mattered very much to God. And, for people like Gene, Becky, and Kay, as well as many others, that's a message that a lot of people still need to hear today.

Here's the thing: All Saints' Day serves to remind us that we can catch glimpses of God at work in the people around us. However, the Beatitudes remind us that some of those people are going to be the outsiders, the marginalized, and those who are oppressed. People, in other words, who think that their lives aren't worth a hill of beans. Because it's in the darkness of such lives that God's light shines the brightest.

And that's why we remember them — just like I do with Gene, Becky, and Kay — because through them God occasionally teaches us something new. And though their lives may have ended too soon, they will live long in our memories.

And that brings me, lastly, to say this: When all is said and done, I believe that each one of us in this room will have been a saint for someone else; that each one of us will have been an agent of God's grace.

And maybe it's because, one day, you were feeling discouraged, but decided to persevere, and someone noticed and took courage from your example.

Or, maybe it's because you reached out to someone whom others ignored or shunned, and they took solace from that gesture.

Or, maybe it's because you gave a simple word of encouragement to someone who

looked like they needed it, and they were renewed by your words.

And the thing is, you weren't *trying* to be saintly or whatever; you were simply, and instinctively, responding to a need that you noticed. In other words: You were just trying to be a decent human being. And through that little something you said or did, God clandestinely worked to inspire someone, to encourage someone, or simply to bless someone.

But some of you may be skeptical about what I'm saying, because we've been raised to believe that the saints are these paragons of virtue, and stalwarts of the faith – people like St. Francis of Assisi, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta – people who devoted whole lifetimes to the needs of others.

And while God would love to have whole lifetimes to work with, all he really needs from us are those moments, here and there, when we're willing to listen to that still, small voice in the back of our mind; or those moments when we're willing to follow that gentle nudging that comes from our heart; or, those moments

when we're simply willing to do what we know is right, rather than what seems, well, prudent.

And so, that's why I can promise you this: One day, in some church somewhere, your name will appear on a list of people being especially remembered, because you will have made a difference in someone's life; and you will be counted as being among the Saints of God.

Amen.