

THEIR GENEROUS LIVES

Erin Kesterson Bowers

Matthew 5:1-12 *Revelation 7:9-17*

October 29, 2017

First Presbyterian Church High Point, NC

Service for the Lord's Day

Imagine, if you will, an infant baptism. We celebrated one just a couple of weeks ago when Ken baptized his own granddaughter. Who doesn't like a baptism? When we bring an infant to the font for baptism, it is usually a sweet day. In most cases, we are really happy about what is going on. Traditionally, the baby is dressed in white. The baby is cute. The parents are beaming. The grandparents are really beaming. The congregation is thrilled. The parents make promises, we make promises. Most of all, we are trusting in God's promises. Usually something sort of funny and cute happens, either with the older sibling, or with the baby herself.

And probably we all have good intentions about the promises we make. Maybe the parents think, "Yes, we'll try to get to church and Sunday school. We'll try to read the Bible at home and say prayers at night. We'll try to be good role models for our children." And maybe the congregation thinks, "Yes, maybe it is time for me to actually do something about these vows I take at every baptism. Maybe I need to find some way to be a part of raising these children in the faith. Maybe I could start by at least meeting this family." And then we watch the cute baby carried around the room, and the rest of the service continues, and it's time for the benediction, and our good intentions go the way most good intentions go.

But the good news is that the effectiveness of baptism doesn't depend on our promises, but on God's promise. The primary promise made in baptism is the promise made by God, and God is always faithful to God's promises. And so, what we are really bearing witness to God's covenant promise that God has claimed that child. Which is a good thing. Right? A blessing. Right?

I mean, being claimed by God means living lives of blessedness. I think that's fair enough to say. The question is, what does it look like to be blessed? For that, we turn to our text from Matthew.

What we read today from Matthew is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And what Jesus is describing is what the character of one who is claimed by God is like. What lives of blessedness look like. But I'm not sure if parents would be beaming at the font or weeping or shaking in their boots if this was the kind of thing we talked about when we celebrated that their child was claimed by God. That a blessed life meant mourning. That it meant persecution. That it meant being poor in spirit. That it meant being called to be peacemakers in this troubled world. That it meant being meek.

Maybe blessedness isn't all it's cracked up to be.

This is a far cry from the oohs and the aahs and giggles that usually characterize our baptismal service.

When we read the Beatitudes, which is the common name for these statements from Jesus, it is hard to know exactly how to take them. Are they commands? Are we supposed to try to mourn? Try to be persecuted? No, more likely they what we call indicative statements. That is, that this is how things are going to be. That if you are a follower of Jesus, mourning is what is going to happen. Persecution is what is going to happen. Of course, each of these statements from Jesus is followed by a promise. But Jesus is not saying that this is how the world works.

Because in the world, it is not always the case that those who mourn are comforted. And those who show mercy do not always receive mercy. And the meek do not always inherit the earth. But Jesus is saying, this is what is going to be true, in my upside-down world. I'm turning the whole thing upside-down. This is good news.¹ And if you have experienced any of this, you've had a taste of the goodness of the Kingdom of God.

We can taste the Kingdom of God here and now, and we can see it, too, in the image of these promises fulfilled in our reading from Revelation today. Revelation is a book of the Bible that we don't often go to, and sometimes even intentionally avoid, but it is important to remember that it is not a scary book, but a book written with the intention to comfort those who were going through difficult times, to remind them that God is victorious, and God has it all in hand—this world and the next.

Today's reading, like the reading from Matthew, though, might give us pause. It might make us wonder about what we are signing up for in our baptism. Because as we see this beautiful image of throngs gathered around the throne, we are reminded that they have come through a great ordeal. When John writes this, he is writing to those who are facing persecution at the hands of Rome. Other translations will actually use the word persecution, or else use tribulation, suffering, oppression, distress but it hardly matters—no matter what word you use, it doesn't sound good. And though you and I live persecution-free lives, sometimes it can still feel like we're being pecked to death by ducks—defending ourselves on one side from those who would sneer and scoff at our faithfulness, and on the other from those who have twisted our faith into a blend of self-help Christianity or Christian nationalism that we no longer recognize but that seems horribly infectious. We don't typically baptize our babies and promise them a great ordeal. But this is, in fact, what characterizes the citizens of the Kingdom of God, also known as the saints of the church.

Very often when we think of the saints of the church, we think of the very significant work of very famous Christians throughout the ages. Those who have done very public things. The martyrs. The great preachers and theologians. Missionaries. Those who have had dramatic conversions. And those are great stories. But most of the work of the saints of the church, most of the heavy lifting of carrying on the faith has been done invisibly, by people who are known only to you, and by people you will never know in times and places around the world that are entirely unknown to you and me. People who have lived their lives in gratitude for what God has done for them. To use the phrase from our sermon series—people who have lived generously.

The work of the saints of the church is the work of unnamed scribes who copied our scriptures for centuries before there was a printing press so that we would have them today. The work of the saints of the church is the work of parents in all times and places who have taught the faith to their children, teaching their children the Bible and teaching them to pray. The work of the saints of the church is the work of those peers and adult friends and mentors with whom young people can discuss matters of faith during that time when parents have become too much to talk to. The work of the saints of the church is the work of those who form relationships with people in their community, at their favorite restaurant, or barber shop, or civic organization, and take the conversation to a deeper level than just the weather. The work of the saints of the church is done by those who have stood up for justice in big ways, sure, but also in small ways, day after day, standing up for those who can't stand up for themselves at school or at work. The

¹ These ideas come from N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One*, p. 36-37.

work of the saints of the church is done by those who always choose the one who is left out. And we always point this out like it's an issue for children and youth, but if we're honest, it's as big or bigger problem for those of us who are adults. We don't naturally go out of our way to make sure everyone feels included. But those who do, are doing the work of the saints of the church. The work of the saints of the church is the work of those who have given of their financial resources through the ages in small and large amounts, to support the mission of the church.

Those who make peace, show mercy in their families, community and world—those who are meek enough to listen to others. And you can add a thousand other ways the saints of the church are at work and have been at work.

And let's be clear, the saints of the church aren't perfect. We can see that throughout scripture, that the heroes of the faith aren't superheroes but everyday people that God has claimed and called to participate in building God's kingdom. Which is both encouraging, but also leaves us without excuse. There's no waiting until we get our act together before we live into our baptism. The claim of God on our lives is persistent, relentless. And it's not just God's claim on our lives here at First Presbyterian Church, High Point. Or just in the churches in High Point, or just in the PC(USA). Or just in the churches in the United States of America. It is God's claim on the lives of all believers all over the world. And it's not even just now, in the 21st century. But God's claim on the lives of the saints in all times and places. That is the picture that we get in Revelation of all those gathered around the throne. I imagine it will be a surprising sight.

Sometimes in a funeral service, you may hear a prayer that goes like this: "We thank you for this servant, whose baptism is now complete in death." And just so, we see the image of baptism in our text today from Revelation, and we see that the saints of God are those whose baptism has been completed in death. Dressed in white robes again, washed once again, worshipping once again. And singing. They can't help but sing.

The elder in Revelation asks who are these, robed in white, and then answers his own question. And when he answers, he doesn't say they are the most famous Christians of all time. That they are the ones who have written the most famous books, or done the most public work. And their clothes aren't white because they are perfect. They aren't white because they have lived lives of perfection. That isn't what has made their robes white. It is the blood of the Lamb that has accomplished it. And then, in another beautiful image, the Lamb becomes their shepherd, leading them on.

So let us give thanks to God for all those who have gone on before us, for the generosity of their lives. Those known to us who are close to our hearts, and those countless unknown to us, from all races and languages and times, who have sometimes given just a little and sometimes given their whole lives to pass the faith on to us. Let us give thanks to God for all the saints, and that includes you and me. But today, we think especially of those who are now gathered around the Lamb singing praises, their baptism now complete in death, the promises of a faithful God fulfilled.

Amen.