The Sign Says, "All Saints, this Way…"
Text: Matthew 5: 1-12
All Saints Sunday, November 1, 2026
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It's impossible to know what the people assembled on that hillside had on their minds or expected that Jesus might say, but I think it is safe to say that it was not what he actually did say: eight or nine "blessings," depending on how you count them.

By the time we arrive at this point in Matthew's Gospel, we have only heard Jesus say, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near." What did Jesus mean by those words? Was he simply repeating what John the Baptist had been saying that wound up getting him arrested?

If there was any single mood or mindset of the people at the time that Jesus arrived, I think that it could best be described as, "despair." Despair, that heavy sense of one's hopes being too long delayed, battered by the realities of politics, war, disease and death.

Every time the banner of independence from Rome, or restoration of the temple and the nation, or hope for the spiritual renewal of the people as a whole–every time, the result had been only more defeats, more deaths, more occupation troops, more corruption.

Despair leads people to do crazy things, of course. Calvin often said that "Satan desperately tries to drive the holy man insane with despair." And the Book of Job was very popular at the time that Jesus arrived. Maybe God is just not there, or somehow playing games with us. Faith felt like foolishness or a form of mental and emotional torture.

For others, despair had led to surrender in everything but words. The Sadducees and Herodians were the symbol of this, Jews by ethnicity and history, but political and economic realists above all else.

And for others, despair led to anger and violence, a reckless, suicidal plotting to lash out at everything that enraged them as men, as Jews, as a nation among the nations, deserving of its place at the top of the list. It was a nationalism that would wreck the country entirely in 70 AD and again, with devastating finality, in 125.

And so Jesus walks in a sea of despair, and while he could have easily rallied people to a desperate insanity of violence, he opens his formal ministry declaration with, yes,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

So far these words could sound like the lead-in to a full-throated vengeance in the minds of the most angrily despairing in the crowd.

"Yes, yes, we have been run over too long."

"Yes, yes, we have been mourning too long."

And so in their minds, the next line should be, "And it is time we did something about it."

But instead, yes, instead, Jesus' next words were, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

If there was any hope in the minds of would-be violent insurrectionists in the crowd, these words ended it. "The meek, seriously? That has been our problem all along," they likely thought. "Doesn't he know that the nation, our very way of life, is at stake?"

But Jesus is obviously headed exactly the opposite of where angry despair always goes. Namely, he turns toward faith in God's ways, not ours.

These words of Jesus are aimed first and foremost at the people in the crowd most at risk of giving up. The humble, the heart-broken, the gentle–which is really what "meek" means.

His list goes on. Those who hunger and thirst for a righteous, just and fair world. The merciful. The pure in heart. The pure in heart. The peacemakers. The persecuted. And those with fresh memories of being ridiculed, mocked, lectured or picked on for being too idealistic and trying to be what others would say is "too good," and maybe "too good for their own good."

But Jesus turns to these people…these very people in this list and pronounces, "Blessed are you" because in this world, it won't feel that way.

Take a look down that list, and you will get an unmistakable feeling of what being a follower of Jesus will feel like, look like, sound like. These words are love in daily clothes. It is a description of "sainthood," as we might like to call it. And who can do what is on that list? It seems impossible.

But that is just our own despair talking.

Because Jesus knows that such "attitudes," that way of life is impossible by human strength. These are too much for us. They can only be created in human beings and sustained in human beings by the faithful mercy and presence of God.

Jesus pronounces this pathway, what Luther calls the "theology of the cross," as "blessed." The Greek word means, "Good news! Your request has been approved."

In the world of humans, you will always feel the wind in your face or a knife in your back, but be reassured, you are on the right path.

Luther said that there are only two paths for humans, for religious people, for theology and our daily thoughts, the theology of the cross or the theology of glory. The theology of the cross knows that God is always found where we least expect God, and the theology of glory is trying to put power, greed and social approval together with the words of faith. But they just won't go there.

Today is All Saints, and it is right that we should look back with humble gratitude on those who have gone before us. But if you are at all like me, you may have to struggle to overcome the idea that the saints are this select group of famously good people who rose above all the rest of human beings and did something great. Indeed, in some quarters of Christian thought, you have to pull off miracles to be a saint.

But for Jesus, this is the pathway of all saints, in all times and in all places. It is like the signs in the airport that say, "All Passengers this way," with an arrow pointing the way. This list that Jesus pronounces in his authority as God among us is the sign that says, "All Saints, this way."

If there is a direction to go exactly opposite to the ways of the human world where bragging and boasting feels like an absolute necessity so much of the time, here it is.

And it starts with the humble. Calvin quoted Augustine with approval when he said that the three great Christian virtues are "humility…humility…and…humility." The humble, the grieving, the people who know what it is to care and to have your heart-broken and to live and wait for God's answers. The gentle, who turn the other cheek and stop for the smallest creature in trouble, the people who so yearn with all their souls to see the world put right for the creation itself and all of God's creatures. The people who show mercy when others want vengeance. The people who keep putting their hearts out there in pure love. The people who sit in the crossfire of violent words and bullets–all these people, while the world laughs or ridicules, dismisses them as fools or picks on and tries to shut them up, to the point of murdering them.

Yes, even to think about being any one of these kinds of people, is too much. Surely we must leave this to some imagined group of "superheroes for God." "We must leave it (safely) to "the saints," whoever they might be.

But here are two concluding thoughts I leave with you. And here is the first.

We are right to feel just how impossible it is to be any of these people. Because any one of these is too much for us. They really are. "We are just not that good."

But what all these people on this list have in common is simply this: their only hope is God, and like all saints, they–all of us–are learning that fact more and more each day. Saints are people learning that our only hope is God. Saints are vulnerable to every form of despair, because if you think the world will support you in this pathway of the cross, if that is your basis for confidence, that the world of human beings as a whole will applaud you, or if you think you can pull yourself up to this level by your own spiritual bootstraps, you will find yourself in a heap. I know, because I have been there.

No, there is only one way anyone ever has or ever will walk the pathway of the cross, or live the theology of the cross. The theology of glory is always out there beckoning us to revel in success and applause and wealth and self-congratulations and self-righteousness. No, the only way anyone ever walks the way of the cross is that God puts you on it and God keeps you on it, and God is the only reason you will stay on it. There is no other reason you will ever walk the way of the cross other than this irresistible, irrevocable gift and call of God to be a disciple of Jesus.

I know this, too, because I have wanted to give up so many times as a Christian, to find a quiet form of despair to settle into, to retire not just from my job but from walking the pathway of the cross. I too want to lash out at times and want to return evil for evil. I too want to hide from the hurting, the poor, the weak, the sick, and shut my ears to the cries of God's creation. I too want to find a pathway to comfort, to self-centeredness, to hard-heartedness and still call myself a Christian. Yes, there are both a Sadducee and a Pharisee very much alive in me, just itching for a chance to turn Christianity into my three wishes.

But the gifts and call of God are irrevocable. And so here I stand, a silly old man preaching to you, hoping to encourage you as you lift up your cross, yet one more time, and follow Jesus down this way of the cross.

Because only the pathway of the cross can heal and reconcile the world. The pathway of the theology of glory only adds one more person fighting for the top of the hill. Only the humble, the broken-hearted, the gentle, the tenaciously fair, the ones with hearts full of love alone, the patient peace-makers, the picked on for all the wrong reasons–only these can heal the world and all its creatures.

And we do it only because of what Luther called, "our naked confidence in the mercy and faithfulness of God." Only that. Only because Jesus, and Jesus alone, tells us it is the right path. And that it is no fool's errand. It is the way, the only way to live. It is how he lived. It is how God lives.

And here is the second thought: You, you, my sisters and brothers, my new friends, you are already on this path. You, you, are in the pathway of the saints of old, because you too are saints.

Saints by definition have nothing to boast about in themselves. They have and make no claims of some super-righteousness. Indeed, they have no righteousness of their own. There simply is no explanation for why any of us are even Christians at all or here today, except that God put us on this

road with Jesus, with each other, with the saints of all ages, who are not above everyone else but below them as their servants.

Who can contemplate such a life? To be servants, in a world hell-bent on the will to power and wealth and applause and attention? Yes, that's us. Servants in the freedom given to us by Jesus himself. And in your soul, you know it, and in your bones, you trust it. Because, you know that there is no explanation for the story of your life but the mercy, grace and faithfulness of God. And even though there have been a thousand, hundred times you as a human wanted to give up or take a break or walk away from the pathway of the cross, the pathway of the saints of all times and places, here you are. The Word of God has captured you.

And you know it.

And today, know this: "Blessed are you." You will see what you have hoped for in the very core of who you are. And it will come not by your strength or smarts or wisdom. It will come by the sheer grace of God, after every other hope and source of strength has dropped away. And you, with all the saints, will enter the kingdom of heaven in all its great expanse in the freedom of the children of God, where all the saints find their prayers fulfilled. It is where the saints answer Jesus' "blessed are you" with the song, "Blessing and honor and glory and praise, be to our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,now and forever." Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.