

I am always deeply touched by the faces and stories that grace our Table of Remembrance on All Saints Sunday. They remind me that we don't walk this life alone. We stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us. We inherit courage and kindness and faith from real people; People who loved us, and people we loved. Their presence reminds us that love stretches beyond time.

Some of the saints we remember today share our blood, and some do not. Because family comes not only from biology; family is also from grace. Many of the people who carried us, steadied us, and showed us the Gospel, came to us not by birth, but by God's weaving them into our lives - friends who became kin, church family who walked beside us, mentors, and sponsors, and companions who loved us, often when we could not love ourselves. The communion of saints is wide, and God's love is generous enough to give us the family we need, in ways we may not have expected.

So when Jesus begins today's Gospel with *"Blessed are you,"* it lands in a tender place. Blessed are you in your memories and in your hopes. Blessed as you think about those who taught you love, even those whose stories with you were complicated. Before Jesus asks anything of us, before he names hard ways of loving, he begins with belovedness. That matters today. Because on a day filled with memory and gratitude, we need to be reminded that we start from blessing.

I think sometimes that belovedness feels almost embarrassing. We're not used to love that doesn't wait to see if we deserve it. God's love rushes toward us like the father in Jesus' parable of the "prodigal son", not cautious or wary, but open-armed and full-hearted. Not conditional. Not earned. Just given. Again and again.

Being a saint doesn't mean being perfect, it means being loved, and letting that love shape you, one ordinary day at a time. Saints weren't set apart because they got everything right. They were set apart because they kept returning to grace, believing God could still work through them... and God did.

As Paul says it: *"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Or as Pastor David Lose puts it this way: *"Grace isn't about counting. Grace is about being counted as beloved, forgiven, and welcomed by God before we could ever earn it."*

In other words, God did not wait for us to get it right before loving us. Jesus didn't come for the already holy. He came to make us whole. We were loved before we believed, held before we understood, and claimed before we ever thought to reach for God. That is the kind of love that formed the saints... and forms us still.

So when Jesus gives us the Golden Rule, *"Do to others as you would have them do to you,"* he isn't offering us a slogan for behavior in polite community. He is describing how people live once they know they are held in God's love. And here's something beautiful: this wisdom isn't just ours as Christians. Across time and tradition — in Judaism and Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, in Confucian and Baha'i

teachings and the words of Jesus — humanity keeps arriving at this truth: we are meant to treat others as we long to be treated. The Golden Rule isn't just Christian; it's deeply human. It's sacred because love is the language of God written into the human soul.

Karoline Lewis reminds us: *"The Golden Rule is not about behavior management. It is about seeing the other as part of your own story, as someone whose flourishing is tied to your own."*

And because Jesus' teachings come in that context, we can hear the harder lines of the Gospel differently too: words like, *"turn the other cheek," "give your cloak also."* These have been misunderstood sometimes as telling us to open ourselves to shameful treatment. But Jesus is not asking us to surrender our dignity, he's asking us to claim it.

In Jesus' world, a strike on the cheek was not only about violence, it was also about humiliation. But turning the other cheek wasn't passivity; in a way, it was courage. By freely offering to accept yet another insult, it was saying: *"You do not get to decide my worth. God already has."*

And giving one's cloak, and even the garments beneath it, exposed the nakedness of injustice rather than hiding it. Jesus wasn't saying, *"Let yourself be taken advantage of."* He was saying, *"You don't need to play by the world's game of power and humiliation. Reveal it. Interrupt it. Stand in your God-given dignity."*

Not weakness — but **dignity**.

Not silence — but **defiance rooted in love**.

That's what belovedness does. It makes us gentle, and it makes us brave. And in both of those examples there is an opportunity for the other person to pause and see us as human — not different.

The observance of All Saints/All Souls is not only about the past. It's also about this moment. When Jesus blesses the poor and the hungry, he is not speaking about abstract spirituality. He is speaking to real human beings living real lives.

So what does this Gospel sound like today, when families in our own communities are facing the loss of nutritional assistance benefits? When the cost of health care rises while subsidies disappear? When people sit at their kitchen tables with a calculator, a grocery list, and a prescription bottle and realize something has to give?

Jesus does not bless hunger itself. Jesus blesses the hungry. Jesus does not bless poverty. Jesus blesses those who are harmed by it. He sees them. He names dignity where our systems willfully turn away. The Gospel is not some sentimental object to worship. It is fiercely practical. It tells us where God stands. And because we follow Jesus, it tells us where we are called to stand, too.

When help shrinks, when families decide between groceries and insulin, when a parent quietly eats less so their children can have more, the question of faith is not:

"Why don't they just work harder?"

The question the Gospel poses is:

"How do we love as God loves?"

How do we honor the dignity of every human being?

How do we advocate? How do we fill in the gaps? with grocery cards, items for the pantry, phone calls, presence, prayer, and persistence?

Beloved people make sure others know they are beloved too.

Saints do not turn away from suffering ...they turn toward it in love.

Looking at the cherished photos and tokens that hold beloved memories on our Table of Remembrance, we honor the saints who touched our lives with their presence and hope, especially in tough times. Carrying their memory also means embracing the sadness of loss, which stems from the deep love we've shared.

Grief is a reminder of that love; it may feel heavy at times, but it also reflects how we've been changed by those we've loved. We find echoes of them in our favorite phrases and shared laughter, and we learn that grief is simply love that hasn't yet found its way to rest. With God's care, love is everlasting; it may shift but never truly fades.

Today, as we light candles, we remember not only those who have shaped us, but also those who are struggling now, and we commit ourselves to supporting one another. As we leave this place, we carry God's blessing with us, filled with courage rooted in love and an open heart.

Blessed are you, beloved of God—blessed as you remember, as you grieve, as you hope, and as you become a saint for someone else. Not because of perfection, but because of the love you share with the world.

Amen.