

Sermon for the Feast of All Saints – Matthew 5:1-12

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today we commemorate All Saint's Day. What is a saint? You know more about the answer to this question than you may think you do. How often have we confessed, "I believe in ... the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints" (which both expressions, taken together, are identical)? Therefore, we also "believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church." We also sing of saints more specifically in the Te Deum, "The glorious company of the apostles praise you. The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise you. The noble army of martyrs praise you. The holy Church throughout the world does acknowledge You." So a saint is someone in the communion of saints which is the same as the holy Christian church in our present day, but that also spans to eternity. "In the same way [the Holy Spirit] calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." This church is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with many different gifts, yet agreeing in love. We were brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Spirit through having heard and continuing to hear God's Word. We are part of this church, as sharers and joint owners of all the goods she possesses. And what the Lord does for the whole church, He does also for us individually: "... the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

And the definition of a saint doesn't get any more practical than the Gospel reading for All Saint's day. Jesus gathers a multitude as He explains it.

Crowds are always following Jesus looking for something. These crowds come from everywhere, not just the locals, and they're filled with expectation. What will Jesus give us today? What will He do? Will He bring about something unexpected? Will He change the world? He always takes their expectations and transforms them into something more significant than they perhaps knew they needed. Christ's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel is the classic example.

Jesus ascends a mountain to teach the commandments of God, not unlike when Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments. Now our Lord would reinterpret these very commandments beyond the letter to also include the spirit. Think you haven't murdered anyone? Think again! If you've even harbored angry thoughts against your brother, you stand condemned. Think you haven't committed adultery? Think again! If you look at a woman lustfully, you are already guilty of adultery in your heart, which is the place that matters most.

The people in Moses' day that approached God on Mount Sinai did so with fear and trepidation. How would the people approach God on the Mount in Jesus' day? What were their expectations? How would Jesus begin to speak to them?

When the crowd arrives, Christ sees them and He opens His mouth and the Beatitudes spring forth. His lips drop the honeycomb of blessing before any other words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are those who mourn ... Blessed are the meek ..." So the crowd approaches this mountain where God is present without fear and filled with great expectations as the Lord sits in their midst to teach them and us like lambs.

As we hear them, the Beatitudes are not just about being "happy," as in Bobby McFerrin's 1988 hit "Don't Worry, be Happy," even if your situation doesn't look very good right now. Happiness has a different quality to it than the Greek word that we find over and over again in the Gospel reading for All Saint's Day. "Makarios" is that Greek word and it is best translated "Blessed." "Makarios" can also mean "to be favored (as Mary), fortunate (not luck but fortune), or privileged because of circumstances (not elite class but being an heir of heaven through Baptism)."

So when compared with blessedness, the emotion of happiness can be rather fleeting as anyone knows who has been happy one minute and then gotten a phone call about a loved one diagnosed with cancer or one of your favorite relatives has gone to be with the Lord. “Blessedness” moves beyond emotion to a state of being, one that is not swayed by what happens to us in the moment, but is instead characteristic of our very identity. As “poor in spirit” we may not necessarily be all that happy about our present state in life; but we are blessed in knowing that we are loved by God and our future is the “kingdom of heaven.” We who mourn can hardly be considered happy. But we are blessed in knowing that as children of the God who has triumphed over death, we can truly find comfort. We who are meek are usually the ones who get trampled in the stampede of life. Yet we are blessed in knowing that the Lord of the universe humbled Himself, taking the form of a servant, even to the point of death on a cross so that we will inherit the earth.

As we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we sound rather needy—and we are; but acknowledging this, we know the Righteous One will satisfy us with good things as He gives us His Spirit by the Word and all the gifts the Spirit has to bring such as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” so that we might grow and become strong in faith. In being merciful, we usually get taken for a ride, or taken advantage of—rarely leading to happiness. Yet we know the mercy of the Lord is not only ours to share, but is to our benefit every time we come to Him in repentance and faith. Why? “[The Lord] has made His wonderful works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and full of compassion ... Yea, our God is merciful ... slow to anger and of great mercy.”

“The pure in heart” among us are considered either naïve or too innocent to ever get very far in life. But we know the One who has called us by name has deigned to live within us. He makes himself known through His word which points us to that day when we will fully know Him and see Him not with the eyes of faith with our own eyes, just as blessed Job declared, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

As peacemakers, we may be applauded for a time, but strife and envy soon follow us. The world knows and teaches the standard fare of contention and division is just the way it is. But as peacemakers we know the One who has brought peace to a broken and confused and utterly sinful world, who has brought us peace through the forgiveness of our sins and a conscience cleansed by water, Word, and His very own Body and Blood.

Finally, it’s doubtful that we who are persecuted for righteousness’s sake, we who are reviled and have all kinds of evil spoken against us falsely because of Christ are ever happy in those trying moments. But we are blessed in the promise that we follow a great line of prophets and apostles who understand their identity in the One who was martyred for us.

In an upside-down world enamored with the idea of happiness, a world that doesn’t know what it wants or needs, a world filled with great expectations but no capacity to deliver—we have our Lord’s words of wisdom and blessing that moves us from moments of happiness to the state of being blessed in the One who calls us His bless-ed saints. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠