

“BEATITUDE”

A Sermon for All Saints Sunday, November 6, 2016

Text: Luke 6:20-31

Is Jesus confused, or are we?

Jesus certainly sounds confused, saying that the poor, the hungry, and those who mourn are blessed. That doesn't make sense. They don't go around saying “Lucky me.”

And it sure takes the fun out of being rich, for Jesus to predict poverty; or to say that those who are full will hunger, and those who laugh now will weep.

Sounds like Jesus is sending us a confusing message.

How could anyone live by that message?

On the other hand, maybe we are the confused ones. I'm going to make that assumption. I'm going to suggest that in the Beatitudes of Jesus in Luke, Jesus is telling us how confused we are.

You and I are the ones who say that people are blessed when they are fortunate. We think people are blessed when they are rich, when they have plenty to eat, when they celebrate happy event after happy event, laughing all the way. We equate that with blessedness. Conversely, we think that being poor, being hungry, and being sad are the very definition of misfortune, bad karma, lack of blessing. Woe.

Maybe that is not so. Perhaps Jesus is saying these weird and discomfiting things to upset our standard notion of what it means to “be blessed.” Perhaps he is redefining beatitude away from our confused notion in which we are willing to settle for earthly blessing.

Perhaps these beatitudes are yet another way of Jesus telling us that true treasure is not something which can be taken away, fade, get rusty, be stolen, or get eaten by moths.

The true treasure he hides in the middle of these sayings. When he says “Blessed are you when people hate you on account of the Son of Man,” he is stipulating that the real treasure to have is . . . himself. The son of Man.

Which is quite liberating! Because when we have that treasure, the value of every other sort of treasure is relativized. Nothing else can have a false value—either too high or too low--when we know the treasure it is to have for our God the God of mercy who has made himself known in the face of Jesus Christ.

Away then with the fear it causes us when we see a dip in the stock market or the checkbook does not balance. Away, too, with the overweening pride of people who are better than other people in any respect.

Rather, holding on to this treasure, we can handle with faith and hope and love all the worst-case stuff Jesus lists: such as people hating us; people injuring us; people begging from us etc. without the fear that our substance is going to run out. We will be all right, we will be “blessed,” if we have the true treasure which is the Son of Man.

I hope this is good news to you. It should be, because I happen to know that you are rich. I have known poor people. If you made it here this morning you are not the poor of the world. If you wanted breakfast this morning you found it. So, if you were to read these words of Jesus and not take them right, you would be reading them as curses.

But these saying are not curses to those who call upon God through Jesus Christ, who “have his name,” which is precisely what we are doing this

morning. We are presenting ourselves as people in need of the mercy of God, and we are finding that merciful God here in the liturgy, in the readings, in the hymns, and at the altar. We are blessed. We come here to admit that, while at times we slip and mistake earthly good fortune for God's blessing and earthly misfortune for God's disfavor, we have come to know better. We have come to know that God's desire to bless us is irrevocably expressed in the dying and rising of his Son, Jesus Christ, whose will for us is only to bless.

And when we remember those who are a part of our fellowship but have already died, we speak of them as we speak about ourselves. It is as true of them as it is of us, that we do not measure their saintliness by the good they have done, but by God's forgiving of them. God makes saints, we don't.

I hope you won't mind if during the year ahead I am more explicit than I have been before about what the Reformation of the church consists in, and why it still matters today.

When we read God's Word as law, and only law, we will always find a God who is angry with us. Reading this passage, for example, we could distill a few learnings to take home and work on this week, to become better Christians. We could try to be obnoxious about our faith so people would hate us on account of the name of Jesus. We might try to put ourselves in positions where we would even be reviled, excluded, and defamed, so that we would receive the reward given to those who are good.

If we read this as law, we will further find that it is necessary to go all Francis-of-Assisi; to empty our pockets and trudge around with a begging bowl, so that we can be rich after we die. And so forth. I could say more, but this is too bleak.

And it is true. We ought to be ashamed, according to these words of Jesus, that there are still the poor among us because we have not done enough. We

ought to ache for those who are homeless, for those who beg at intersections, and so on. Jesus is spot on. The trouble with the world is that the hearts of people who claim to be God's children are colder than warm.

But as Luther wrote in his Treatise on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass:

Where there is unwillingness, there can never be a good work. For what is not done willingly is not good, but only seems good. Consequently all the laws cannot make one really righteous without the grace of God. Instead they only produce Pharisees, hypocrites, pretenders, and haughty saints, such as have their reward here (Mt 6:2) and never please God.

Haughty saints? God forbid.

So, how does God produce better saints? I don't want to shock you too much, but this is what Luther wrote:

Christ, in order to prepare for himself an acceptable and beloved people, which should be bound together in unity through love, abolished the whole law of Moses. And that he might not give further occasion for divisions and sects, he appointed in return but one law or order for his entire people, and that was the holy mass. Henceforth, therefore, there is to be no other external order for the service of God except the mass [what we call Communion].

Perhaps Dr. Luther has shocked you. But what he is saying is that the making of saints is God's doing through his Son Christ. Next time we say about someone or other that he or she is a "real saint," we need to remember that we are just as truly saints. We need no further beatification than the Word of the Gospel, which we receive with nothing more than faith.

If we were to publish a book "Biographies of the Saints," it would look pretty much like a collection of our stories. And the stories of some people who

might surprise you might be included. Just as the people around Jesus were surprised when he called them, despite their poverty and hunger and sadness and the debts they owed and the losses which had scarred them, “blessed”—for no other reason than this simple one, that they had received him.

Come, receive the same blessing at the table of the Lord. Then, go and act like God’s saints. Amen.

