

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 5:1-12
Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10,22
1 John 3:1-3

November 1, 2020
All Saints' Sunday

I must admit...I started and stopped this sermon many times this week. Writing one thing only to delete it and try again. I wanted to write something hopeful but also not naïve. I kept wondering and praying...how do I preach about the Gospel on a week like this? On a week where we are facing a shift in our identity as a country, a seismic shift in what we had hoped and what we had planned on so many fronts.

We face a staggering number of COVID cases. More shut downs beginning in Europe surely to soon move to the US. The loss of loved ones to COVID or any number of other causes and we can't mourn the way would like. We are voting our voice in one way or another, looking toward the future with unsteady feet.

Next week, we will have *some* clarity (maybe). But this week, we face a wave of uncertainty and wonder what tomorrow will bring. And then, we hear those words... Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek, the hungry, the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart and blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the persecuted. Blessed. Blessed. Blessed. Oh please, Lord, let that be true. For all of us.

And, since it's All Saints Day...I couldn't help but wonder what this day had to teach in times like these. What does this blessing mean?

Do you remember when your grandparents told you that they walked up hill both ways in the pouring rain, 2 miles each way just to get to school? Yeah. That story. The one you rolled your eyes at as a kid. Well, let's go back to that story and see what those saints who went before us had to teach. So, you put on your rain coat and walking shoes and let's start walking. And, oh by the way...no whining (at least that's what my grandmother would say).

First...think about the people in your life who got it right. I mean the one's you remember who persevered when things got tough. Who went the extra mile. Who looked at adversity and uncertainty with a certain faith that brought an incredible amount of peace in the midst of troubled times. What was going on for them that we might be lacking today? How did they understand blessing?

Let's start with one simple word from our Gospel reading, a word that gets at a practice of selfless action, a desire to contribute, an understanding of how we apply blessing to our lives today. I'm talking about the ability to align our head and heart with the heart of Christ. The word I want us to look at is found in verse 4. It's the word *comfort*. I've chosen this word because our English translation doesn't do it justice and we need to dig deeper.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be *comforted*." In our context today, we often understand comfort in a specific way...usually it's the way we help someone feel better...we do something for them. We bake a casserole. We call them on the phone. We send an email.

However, the Greek verb conveys something much deeper than simply offering to help someone feel better. The full meaning of *comfort* in the Greek calls for advocacy, an active commitment to help someone overcome a given situation. In other words, Jesus is talking about working to change the *cause* of their pain, to get at the *root* of the problem, not just to put a band-aid on the injury but to create a resolution, a solution.

Remember, when Jesus is talking to the disciples in these verses, he is preparing them to go out and do...to bring God's kingdom to fruition on earth, to heal the sick, to help the suffering, to create change and upend the status quo. He sends them out into hostile territory and make no mistake, the work wasn't easy. But the outcome was worth working for.

So, when the saints who have gone before us heard these words of blessing, I believe they got ready to muddy the water, to cause good trouble. They had a work ethic that kept them looking toward the future with hope, not despair. They saw opportunity to make a difference for the suffering and the mourning, the meek and the persecuted. And, when we call their names out in our hearts, my guess is that each and every one of the people we remember were willing to go the extra mile or two or three (even if it was up hill both ways) to do what was needed. And they walked those hills with joy. That's how they understood blessing.

Today, we sit at Jesus' feet, listening to these words of scripture. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek, the hungry, the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart and the peacemakers. Blessed are the persecuted. We sit at Jesus' feet and are called to advocate for a reality that brings blessing to the world. It's our responsibility, our duty, our commitment. To not just walk one way when it is most convenient but to walk both ways up hill, in the rain for however long it takes. And, to do it with the heart of Christ.

Raj Nadella from Columbia Seminary says that when we see people hurting, *"...the question need not, and should not, be: Where is God when people are mourning, hungry...or denied mercy? Instead, the question should be: Where is God's community and what is it doing to reverse the situation?"*¹ How are we advocating for change where change is needed?

Thomas Merton talks about it this way, "If we really want to be saints in the full sense of the word, we must let God's power really work on us...." But he says that we tend to resist the transformation that this requires. So, we have to keep at it. We have to keep trying to live into our own blessedness. With little breakthroughs every day and every week and every month, growing ourselves into Jesus' disciples one step at a time.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4652

I believe that we all have it within us to rise to the occasion in front of us. I believe in our hearts we want to be the kind of person Christ calls us to be. Merton believes we all have that capacity as well, the capacity to be transformers, game changers, reformers and saints. He says that the power of God, "is in the depths of our soul and we are stronger than we think, not because we are strong, but because God is strong in us."

We face a future of redemptive hope. We lean in to better days together, blessing one another out of our pain, out of our troubled hearts, out of hunger and out of oppression, out of discord, out of hate. We advocate for peace, for unity, for equality and for justice. We commit to bringing God's kingdom to fruition even if at times it means going uphill, both ways.

Amen.