

ALL SAINTS 2020, New Song Episcopal Church

Matthew 5.1-12

The Rev. Mel Schlachter

It is a daunting privilege to have the preacher's staff passed to me two days before such a serious election whose effects promise to be with us for some time, regardless of winners and losers. More daunting than privilege, I think. And it is the Feast of All Saints, one of the big seven of Christian celebrations. The calendar puts these two events together. Do we talk about the saints running for office? Maybe the Beatitudes as a party platform. It sure Trumps the other platforms, but to bring it about you have to Biden your time.

Sorry No matter who is up for election, we cannot easily get around either the Beatitudes, today's traditional Gospel, or the saints.

Matthew's and Luke's Gospels both have the "Blessed" statements from Jesus, one spoken from a mountain the other on level ground; one with four clauses the other with nine; and Matthew's' more spiritually oriented. "Blessed are you poor," says Luke, whereas Matthew says "Blessed are the poor in spirit." (parenthetically, any number of comfortable, prosperous Christians rely on Matthew to get them off the hook. Matthew would not agree.) Literal or spiritual, it would not be included in anybody's party platform. No, we are the people who want a triumphant leader, a King David or Solomon

with all the charisma. But it is very clear in the Hebrew Bible that God prefers the poor and marginalized. That theology goes right into Jesus life and ministry, the one who made himself poor and outcast.

For Matthew the Blesseds include those who hunger and thirst...for righteousness, not necessarily food and drink or military budgets (which is a thirst for both our political parties). However you understand those who are meek, or who mourn, those pure in heart or peacemakers, they seldom get elected to American government offices. And by contrast we would find these qualities among most of the people in our calendar of saints.

Sounds like a collision course—What are we Christians meant to do with the Beatitudes? At least by the fourth century a theologian or two was mitigating the punch of some of these, taking away the simple direct sense. Closer to the modern era, Lutherans in particular have seen these teachings as moral standards that are really impossible for humans to live up to, yet we are meant to try our best, and above all be aware of the sin in our failure to rise to the bar. Reminders of sin. (Right, Mark?) But however we interpret them, the “Blesseds” are recognized the world around as the heart of Jesus’ teaching. Which means we’ve got to do something with them.

As we dally among the phrases and chew on the words, one item we may miss because we expect something else, is that the tense of the verbs is without imperatives. We are not

admonished to do or be anything. Instead, the verbs are indicative, matter of fact observation.

That presents a different challenge—when have we seen someone poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of heaven? Or the meek inherit the earth? Maybe you have. Peacemakers get called a lot of things, but not often “children of God” as they nurse their bruises from getting in the middle of a conflict or attempting to shut down a drone control center. And yet those Blesseds ring true for many of the saints we celebrate today.

Pastor and theologian Tim Beach Verney believes that the present indicative points to wisdom for this world, the point being that these are God’s way of reconciling the world to himself and, in fact, the best way of doing so. He say,

“The Beatitudes are primarily about the character of God and only secondarily about the character of Christians. Because God believes in the way God does, a person would be foolish not to act in the way the Beatitudes recommend. That the behavior of Christians so often fails to conform to the Beatitudes is a sign not of moral weakness but of a lack of faith. We simply do not trust Jesus, his words or his deeds. We do not really believe that God will bless the poor....”

ETc. Etc.

So we can stop obsessing over our guilt at not measuring up, or wondering how much money we can have and still go to heaven. Instead we have been invited to a deeper faith. We

may still swallow hard and yell OMG—O My God—like looking over the edge of a high precipice not knowing how to go down. And reviled or persecuted? I've got a mortgage and a job. Deeper faith can seem fearful.

The Feast of All Saints can help dispel such fear, since our fears come from thinking we have to learn faith all by ourselves. Not true. Or lose control of our identity. Also not true. A saint even from long ago can befriend us and walk with us on our faith path. The tradition of the saints not only keeps their memory alive but allows them to be present for us. And yes, teach us the Beatitudes.

There are many ways to encounter your saint—by reading, by travelling to countries and places trod by saints, through scripture, by encounters with icons. However it happens you are usually stirred in your heart or mind as you would be a new acquaintance with whom you sense you hit it off. So you go deeper. Why do you click with that saint? How are they a doorway to God for you?

I recently asked members of a clergy group who their saint was, who had inspired them or led them along their journey. A most interesting discussion. St. Francis you recognize, but also Sts Kevin and Columba and Cuthbert and Abba Moses—Irish, Brit and Egyptian from ancient times; and Bernard of Clairvaux, and Rabbi ben Asher as well as Francis from medieval times. These clergy have had long relationships with their saints.

You may be called to companion with someone in another tradition who likewise is a doorway to the divine. Or to a story, like Moses and the Burning Bush or Mary Magdalene's meeting the Christ of Easter. Many years ago I became hard wired to the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, depicted by many artists. It has represented for me the way the household will change and adapt in order to survive, to care for one another, to stay intact somehow despite challenge or great adversity. I think now of families intact or not yet together at our southern border..

Are you intimate with your saint, or do you need to hunt for such a relationship? Travelling is a great way because Columba and most of the others are local saints somewhere. Reading about them or reading their works is another. St. Francis left us "Canticle of the Sun." Abba Moses left sayings and anecdotes written down by disciples. May I suggest a couple of sources, too:

Holy Women, Holy Men

Sayings of the Desert

The Venerable Bede

The Celtic Year

Your genealogy The wisdom we seek can be there in our own clan.

I sing a song of the saints of God, patient and brave and true...

God helping to be one too.

