

All Saints Day, November 3, 2019 (Lk 6:20-31; Ps 149; Eph 1:11-23)

Today we celebrate the remembrance of those who have gone before us. We also celebrate holy communion, which binds us together as the body of Christ. *We*—the *people*—are the church, the body of Christ, past, present, and future. And here at St John we celebrated the sacrament of holy baptism.

In my very first seminary class in 1995, Dr. Charles Sigel posed a question to us future pastors. *Does Jesus mean us to take the Beatitudes seriously? Does he expect us to actually live by them?*

It took me several months before I realized that's *exactly* what Jesus was saying. These were no idle words he shared with the crowds and the disciples. They were a vision of the reality of God's kingdom on earth, the vision of what will be when enough people pray, **your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

The Beatitudes—or *blessings*—help us understand where we are in relation to God's kingdom. If you're poor, you're in. If you're hungry, you're in. If you're weeping, you're in. So far, so good. *We're* certainly not *rich*. We've all been hungry. And God knows we've all wept. Of course, compared to millions, even billions, of people in the world, we who are here today are obscenely wealthy.

But the fourth beatitude is harder: **Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject you and defame you *because of the Son of Man*.** Matthew's gospel puts it this way: **Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

The world around us lives by a totally different set of values. If we fit into this cultural norm—if the people around us accept us as being just like them—then we’d better take another look at whether we’re living in the kingdom of God or not.

The truth is, God’s kingdom won’t be fully present in *this* life until the church—that is, *the people of God*—begin to live *counter-culturally*. And, as we heard in Ephesians, “the church” isn’t just some abstract concept of holiness. The church is *the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers*. We are the church.

When we united little Octavia with Christ in baptism, just a few minutes ago, we confessed the faith of the Church, the faith in which we baptize.

If we believe what we confessed—what we *professed*—we’ll be coming down on the side of those who are blessed. We’ll be agreeing that God desires to bless those the world curses: the poor, the unemployed, the oppressed, the mentally ill, those who live different life styles, those who worship other gods. *Our* God desires to bless them. And that blessing is most likely to happen when *we, the people of God*, live out God’s love for all people.

Jesus turns everything upside down! He pronounces blessings on the ones who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity—those the world so often loves to condemn or reject. And Jesus curses, with his *woes*, the ones who are king of the mountain: the rich, the filled up, the laughing.

So when we re-read the fourth beatitude, we'd better pay attention! If there is any one, anywhere, who has less than we do, maybe Jesus *isn't speaking to us to bless us*.

We need to read the New Testament in context with the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. And it can't be understood as an invitation to use our faith in God as a way to wealth or power.

There are so-called Christian denominations that teach a terrible falsehood. They proclaim if you have faith in God, he'll reward you with riches and power. They preach what we call "the Christ of glory." For them, the glory of Jesus, risen from the dead, is all-important. They believe Jesus died for them to give *them* glory.

The ELCA—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—worships what we call "the Christ of the cross." For us, the true glory of Jesus lies in his humility, his acceptance of *human* life, his willingness to die to show us the ultimate glory of God.

For us, *true worship of the Christ of the cross* is to live out his commandments: to love one another as he has loved us; to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Jesus said, I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . . Do to others as you would have them do to you.

God's love for us is so incredibly, amazingly huge, he loves us all the time, *just the way we are*. He's always looking for more ways to bless us. There's *far* more mercy in God than sin in us.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son to die for us, so that everyone who believes in him may not *perish*, but may have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him.

Saved through him. *Blessed* through him. *Redeemed* through him. *Brought closer* in love to him. God loves you just the way you are.

He loves you so much, he desires even more for you than you already have. His ultimate desire is for you to live *in* him, *with* him, *for* him, both now and forevermore.

That's why he gives us, again and again, his own body and blood. So we'll *remember* that he is with us always, even to the ends of the earth.

So we'll be reminded that when we receive his body and blood, we're com-muning—we're in union with—those who have gone before us, those who are now feasting at the table of eternal delight with Jesus himself.

So *come* to the Supper! Let your heart kneel in adoration, or weep with thanksgiving, or dance with joy, as you receive in *your* body the very body and blood of God himself, who loves you enough that he died for you.

Thanks be to God!