



**Blessed are the Poor**

**Luke 6:20-31**

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Last week, many of us celebrated one of the oldest holidays of the Christian faith – perhaps without even recognizing its connection with our faith. Though capitalism has made Halloween the second largest commercial holiday in the US, with Americans spending some \$6 billion annually on the celebration, the history behind Halloween is deeply connected with Christianity.

As we were celebrating Halloween in our house last week, one of the boys asked Jen and I this question: “Why doesn’t Halloween have an Eve like Christmas?” He wanted to know why Christmas has a night of celebration prior to the day of celebration, but Halloween is just a day.

It’s questions like this that end up giving preacher’s kids their reputation.

I don’t know how you would answer this question, but with two parents who both work in the Christian Church, this becomes a dangerous question to ask. I nearly pulled out my seminary notebooks as I began my lecture on the history of Halloween as the “Eve” to All Saints’ Day. Because that is what Halloween is: perhaps better referred to as All Hallows Eve, the societally recognized holiday is nothing more than the precursor to All Saints’ Day, which is officially celebrated on November 1.

In the Christian tradition, the celebration of the saints goes back to the early 7<sup>th</sup> Century, when Pope Boniface IV first dedicated a day in recognition of those who had been martyrs for the faith. The festival expanded under Pope Gregory III to include all saints and martyrs. As Christianity spread, in the late Middle English period around the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the celebration became known as “All-hallows,” stemming from the Middle English word *Alholomesse*, which means All Saints’ Day. Thus, the night before All Hallows Day was All Hallows Eve.

In the Church today, though November 1 is the official day for remembering the saints, most congregations celebrate All Saints’ Day on the first Sunday after November 1.

I have long been curious about All Saint’s Day as I’ve wondered, who are we really celebrating on this day? Is All Saints’ Day a day to celebrate everyone who has died who at some point had been a part of the church (or our Christian family): mamas and papas, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, Sunday school teachers and users? Or, is this day supposed to be about celebrating a select few who have risen to the top of the list of our forebearers in the faith?

In the history of Christianity, at least as this day was formed by Popes Boniface IV and Gregory III, those remembered on All Saints’ Day have historically held a special place in the Christian story. These were Martyrs, like Stephen (who was stoned to death), and Paul (who was imprisoned and later killed in Rome). These were also Saints recognized by the Vatican, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis of

Assisi, and St. Mary Magdalene. Today, there are more than 10,000 saints officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

In the protestant traditions, including denominations like United Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians, the term “saint” has not been quite so exclusive. We have no official list of saints, and there has been no *formal* process by which a person earns the title “saint.” In fact, in general, we have quite openly defined a “saint” as being any person who has been committed to the Christian faith. If you are any member of the church, a person who has said the Jesus prayer at some point in the past, or simply anyone who claims Christ as Lord in your life, you can be held among the ranks of saints to be remembered as part of All Saints’ Day.

Admittedly, this open ended invitation to sainthood seems a bit odd to me. As someone who grew up being told that our goal as Christians was to “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,” and who has used that goal as a driving force in conjunction with my Enneagram 3 identity, which always leads me to desire accomplishment, it feels odd to extend the title of “saint” to just anyone. If anyone can be recognized as a saint, why the hell am I trying so hard?

And that brings me to our scripture for this morning – a text that the Revised Common Lectionary offers as the Gospel reading for the celebration of All Saints.

This story comes near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Jesus had been up on a mountain in prayer as he identified who the twelve apostles would be from among those who had become his disciples. The text in Luke makes clear that there are more than twelve disciples at this time, even early in Jesus’ ministry. The term “disciple” was applied to any who had taken up following a leader or a rabbi and learning from them. The apostles were identified as those who would be leaders among the disciples. So, Jesus names the 12 as apostles, and they are identified by name in verses 14 through 16. Then Jesus returns down the mountainside and has some interaction with, and I quote, “a great crowd of disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.”.

As we read verse 20, where our text picks up this morning, it begins, “He looked up at his disciples and said ...” Normally, given our general reading of the gospel text, we would assume that Jesus is speaking to just the 12 disciples – because in most of the gospel text, “the disciples” is referring to just the 12. However, here in Luke’s gospel, in chapter 6 specifically, the storyline has named that there are many disciples, even as there are 12 apostles among them. So, when Jesus looks up to speak, he’s not just talking to the 12, he’s speaking to “a great crowd” disciples who have gathered with him. This is a public teaching, and all are invited to hear.

The beginning of Jesus’ sermon is known as the beatitudes. These are the statements of blessings. In fact, the word *beatitude* means “supreme blessedness.” As Jesus begins, he offers four statements of blessing. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are reviled and defamed.

In Matthew’s gospel, these same beatitudes appear in the Sermon on the Mount, only in Matthew’s telling of the story, these statements of blessing take on a spiritual focus. Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

Luke's gospel does not spiritualize these statements; he makes them physical. And, to drive home his point, Luke's gospel adds an additional four statements that name the opposing force to blessedness. After naming that which makes one blessed, Luke offers that which brings upon woe. "Woe to you who are rich ... to you who are full (or satiated, no longer hungry) ... to you who laugh ... and to you when all speak well of you."

These statements of woe are offered in direct opposition to the preceding statements of blessing:

- Blessed are you who are poor; woe to you who are rich.
- Blessed are you who are hungry; woe to you who are full.
- Blessed are you who weep; woe to you who laugh.
- Blessed are you who are reviled and defamed; woe to you when all speak well of you.

"As throughout Luke's entire book, what is presented here is a hard-hitting gospel. It is good news to the poor and the powerless."<sup>i</sup> These words are little more than an affirmation of what Mary proclaimed in her song about Jesus back in Luke 1 when she sang, "The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones," "filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty," and "scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts."

In this message, Jesus is offering a strong statement of what faithfulness looks like, what God's divine work looks like. And as any statement made to the disciples, Jesus lays plain and clear the path of righteousness for those who wish to follow him.

As such, it would do us well to reflect on these beatitudes in light of All Saints' Day.

In fact, I'll tell you what, in a cruel twist of remembrance this morning, as I read through the names we have printed in the bulletin today, I'll be asking if these individuals were poor or rich, hungry or full, full of laughter or tears, and whether they were reviled or spoken highly of. Any who do not pass this beatitude test, which we'll say requires a 50% score, will be taken off our list for remembrance this morning.

Obviously I say this in jest, because per usual, there's more to this scriptural text than we might first acknowledge. While I do think Jesus offers these as high standards for discipleship, I think there are two key components that are often overlooked in this text that might help us *better* understand Jesus' call to faithfulness.

First, you'll notice in each of these statements, both in the statements of blessing and woe, each sentence has a personal pronoun: blessed are "you" and woe to "you." We often try to identify ourselves – and perhaps in judgement, identify others – as falling within certain statements in this sermon, while disassociating ourselves with others.

But, as is often found in Jesus' teachings, the "you" is a plural "you." As Jesus is speaking, he is not speaking to or about any individual, he is speaking to and about the whole. We often hear the beatitudes as if *one* might apply to us, but not another, when it seems Jesus is implying, these all apply to all of you.

What if, instead of trying to align ourselves with some statements and absolving ourselves from others, we took pause to realize that each of these eight statements applies to us all? What if, instead of defining ourselves as poor or rich, we accepted that there are days, times, and areas of our lives in which we are all both poor *and* rich? What if, we noticed that there are days in all of our lives in which we laugh, and others in which we cry? What if Jesus isn't trying to separate us into two groups – one faithful, and one reviled – but was instead trying to help us see the commonality we all share in both our brokenness and blessedness?

I ask these questions in light of the second key component that we often miss in this text.

As Chelsey Harmon notes in her commentary, Jesus is making a point about connection. “Those to whom the *warnings* apply appear to be connected only to themselves and to the present moment.”<sup>ii</sup> As Jesus names elsewhere, it is not necessarily one's present situation that defines their faithfulness (or lack thereof), but the *heart* of the person. Are you self-centered, prideful, and disconnected from the work of God in the world? Or, are you humble, meek, and sharing what you have for the betterment of the whole?

Only by acknowledging that we are all part of this same body – a body that goes through the ups and downs together – who experiences blessedness and woes at different times and in different seasons – can we recognize that which actually leads us in the path of discipleship. And this recognition gives us our reason for celebrating the saints today.

See, “today is not a day to memorialize sanitized versions of saints old or new.” There is no beatitude test to be passed. “It's a day to celebrate [the saints] as claimed by God – in all of their messy humanity. ... They don't have to be perfect.”<sup>iii</sup> They don't have to have lives that were only defined by the “blessedness” of the beatitudes. They don't have to have avoided all the things that bring us “woe.” For such perfection only comes from the perfect love of God in Jesus Christ. And *that* is why we can celebrate the saints – those who have come before us – because, try as hard as they might in life, fail as many times as they did, in the full presence of Christ in eternal life, they have been made perfect.

And it is the perfect love of God that unites us even here and now with the memories and the eternal presence of these saints, reminding us that we do not walk this path alone. We are part of this great cloud of witnesses, admonished by Christ to acknowledge we cannot do this on our own, but instead taught in the closing words of this morning's text to love one another – even those who may be most difficult to love.

So we gave thanks on this All Saints' Day for those who have come before us, whose legacy reminds us that we are united by the Spirit, made as one by the Creator, and redeemed by the Savior, that we might share in the blessings and the woes as one people, one body, one community now and forever even as we seek to live and to love as Christ has taught us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez. *Luke, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Chelsey Harmon. “Luke 6:20-31 Commentary” <http://cepreaching.org>. Retrieved November 2, 2022.

<sup>iii</sup> “All Sinners and Saints.” <http://abidingpeacechurch.org>. Retrieved November 2, 2022.