

Sermon Notes November 5, 2023
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Matthew 5: 1-12
“Set Apart ...Children of God”

The texts for All Saints Day, and the spirit of the day, require spiritual leaders to wrestle with two fundamental questions: Who exactly is a saint? And what does it mean to be *blessed*?

The latter helps define the former. “To be *blessed* by God is a quality of saintliness; likewise, “*blessed* are...” is the driving theme of the Beatitudes. The Greek word used in today’s gospel text from the New Testament book of Matthew can be translated in a variety of ways: “*blessed*,” “happy,” or even “congratulations.” Ancient Greeks reserved “*blessed*” for the gods.

Later writers would describe the dead as “*blessed*” because they were removed from the cares of the world. The rich and powerful would come to be known as *blessed*, a trend that continues in the modern “#*blessed*” posts on social media.

But Jesus proposed something new when he uses the term in the Sermon on the Mount. His “*blessed*” are first the poor, followed by those who mourn, the meek, and the hungry. Only then does He turn to perhaps a more amenable vein (the merciful, the pure in heart, peacemakers). Jesus intends for listeners to hear dissonance from the onset of His sermon. There is no suggestion that those who do the right thing will have comfortable and easy lives. As if to emphasize the point, Jesus includes among the *blessed* the persecuted and the falsely accused.

This theme, that the saints are rarely those who the world sees as *blessed*, continues in the other readings. Those gathered before the lamb in Revelation have “come out of the great ordeal, ...their robes washed white ...in the blood of the Lamb” (7: 14), a portrayal that may well imply martyrdom. In Psalm 34 the writer expresses joy and deliverance only after barely escaping capture. This psalm is attributed to David, who escaped his enemies by feigning madness (1 Samuel 21: 10-15).

Who are the saints then? Not just the dead, but also the living. All Saints Day is a good opportunity to lean into the fullness of Luther's saint-and-sinner dichotomy. According to Luther, our suffering makes us no more worthy of sainthood than does our social status. What really makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through sinners. The

believer is worthy of blessing, the Christian becomes a saint, but only because of God's love. Moses offered the law upon the mountaintop; Jesus, on another mountain, teaches what it means to fulfill it. He Himself will ensure that His preaching is true through His death on the cross. The blood of the Lamb becomes the waters of baptism, welcoming all as saints to new life.

We can offer a vision of God to the pure of heart, and the promise of the kingdom to those poor in spirit. And when we stumble, if we are persecuted for the sake of this work, we can hold on to the promise of heaven. The saints who have gone before us show us the way. Like them, we are *blessed* to be God's children now and forever.

