

Kingdom People

When you think of a saint, what kinds of images come to mind?

Do you get a mental picture of a member of New Orleans' NFL team?

When many of us hear the word *saint*, we envision an incredibly virtuous man or woman whose pinnacles of piety we could never hope to ascend.

Or we recall the life of someone who no longer walks this earth.

We've seen artists' conceptions of saints. They're usually portrayed with an aura, a halo of light surrounding their heads.

These are some of the ways we think of saints.

Today is All Saints Sunday, a day for considering and remembering and reflecting on saints. In the tradition of the church, All Saints Day is one of the major feast days of the Christian calendar. On this All Saints Sunday, the reading from Matthew's Gospel is the beginning of Jesus' best-known sermon.

You know, figuring out how to begin a sermon isn't always easy. Not for a lot of us ordinary preachers, anyway. But Jesus is no ordinary preacher. He knows exactly how to start his Sermon on the Mount. Right up front, he gets his disciples' attention.

How does he do it? He blesses them! He says, "Blessed are you." You're blessed.

We know these blessings of Jesus as the beatitudes. It's good for us, for the church, to hear the beatitudes on All Saints Sunday. Maybe that's because the way we've come to feel about them is kind of like the way we feel about saints. This morning we hear the beatitudes as they appear in *The Message*, with a freshness and a directness that makes them easier to understand—and to relate to.

For in the translations we've heard all our lives, these beatitudes seem to embody a way of life that seems all but unattainable for mere mortals like you and I. That might be because, from birth, we've been conditioned by a very different worldview.

We've been conditioned by a worldview that celebrates and blesses independence and pride in self-sufficiency, rather than a poverty of spirit that acknowledges need.

We've been conditioned by a worldview that celebrates and blesses chasing after happiness, rather than acceptance of the cleansing tears that come to each of us.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses assertiveness and aggressiveness, rather than humility and vulnerability.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses being filled and satiated, rather than hungering and thirsting.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses looking out for number one, rather than reaching out in compassion and acts of mercy.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses a fascination with many gods—many idols—rather than a heart of love for the Holy One alone.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses standing your ground and sticking up for yourself, rather than working to resolve conflict and accomplish peace.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses using various means of retaliation, rather than allowing a wrong to go unavenged.

By a worldview that celebrates and blesses keeping a low profile at a time that calls for faithful witness, rather than

opening yourself to the prospect of being ridiculed or rejected because of the Christ.

These beatitudes of Jesus are out of step with the world's values. They're in direct opposition to what the world would have us believe. Jesus invites you and me to embrace a radically different set of values, to walk a different way: the way of him who overturns conventional mindsets and will ultimately turn this upside-down world right-side up.

In the meantime—in this time between the times—we've somehow gotten the idea that before we can qualify as true disciples of Jesus Christ, we first have to be all that his beatitudes affirm as blessed.

But, my brothers and sisters, these teachings of Jesus are not requirements for entering life in him. Thanks be to God—Jesus is depicting and blessing the willing responses of believers who have first been touched by grace. The grace of God *always* comes before the response of human creatures. The beatitudes of Jesus aren't part of an application for discipleship. The beatitudes of Jesus bless those who have already *become* disciples. Who are following Jesus into God's reign. Who are saints.

Saints are kingdom people.

But saints don't turn their backs on the world. Saints don't hide from the world. Saints engage the world. Saints make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In an awareness of God's intention to restore creation to its original goodness, saints pray to be used in accordance with God's purpose. To be used as God's instruments. Saints seek justice and strive to make peace. To be peacemakers. Children of God.

The first letter of John reminds us that we are children of God. John doesn't claim that we will be God's children *someday*, but assures us that we have that status right now. We've been given a place in the family of God. One day, faith will become sight and we will see—John promises—the One whose life of shining purity is a model for your life and mine. Emulation of that purity begins from the inside out. Starts with getting our hearts right. Ensuring that they're hearts of single-minded devotion and undivided allegiance to the One God we worship and serve. For there is no other.

Saints know this, and are blessed. Like Abraham and Sarah, blessed to be a blessing. Saints are kingdom people.

The beatitudes paint a portrait of what life in this coming kingdom looks like. The beatitudes draw a sketch of what we who follow its King are growing to look like. That use of the plural pronoun *we* is intentional.

Because when Jesus offers these words of blessing, he wants his disciples to hear them not as individuals, but as community. Living into them is not something we have to do alone. Each one of them guides and blesses our common life. Our life together. I like the way Alice McKenzie puts it: “Each beatitude is like a glowing candle, waiting to light our path.”

In this light, you and I are able to view present circumstances through a new lens. This light gifts us with kingdom perspective: one of anticipation, one of sure and certain hope. A perspective that begins but doesn’t end today.

Just like these teachings that shape life in the kingdom of heaven. They extend into another dimension. These beatitudes of Jesus begin in the here and now and reach into the future. They’re blessings that—like God’s great kingdom itself—are already present but not yet fully accomplished. Blessings that are already but not yet. Blessings that are signs pointing to a future reality. And not confined to a particular time.

Neither are saints confined to a particular time. Saints are kingdom people. Faithful people of *every* time. Prophets. Apostles. Martyrs who have testified with their lives as a witness to their faith.

And saints are people we've known personally. No longer physically present with us, we remember them and miss them and honor their memories with gratitude for the time they spent among us and for the story they loved to tell us and for the sermons we saw in their lives.

Saints are people who have entered the church triumphant. And saints are faithful men and women in the world today. Saints are in the pews of this sanctuary right now!

But saints aren't only Sunday morning gathering-in-worship people. Saints are also scattering-in-service people. Saints are also going-out-the-doors-of-this-church people. Saints are also Monday-through-Saturday people.

Into a world of brokenness, saints bring wholeness. Saints advance the kingdom of heaven. Saints bring it very near. Saints are kingdom people.

Saints are people who hear and accept the psalmist's invitation to *taste and see that the Lord is good*. People who

come to the table of grace to taste his goodness, to eat and drink.
And—with eyes of faith—to see the One who meets you there.
Who draws you close with those who feast at a heavenly
banquet, yet are among you still in mystic sweet communion.
All you saints together. You're kingdom people. You're blessed!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the
Holy Spirit. Amen.