

Matthew 5:1-12

“Where God Is?”

Today we celebrate All Saint’s Day, when we honor those who have gone before us in the faith. We have lifted up the names of our “honored dead,” both those of this church family as we lit the candle in their memory, and in our hearts as we remembered other loved ones in our own lives. Today is a day to remember how we have been shaped by others in our lives...an aunt, a Sunday School teacher, a special friend or relative that changed how we think about God, how we behave, helping us to grow closer to Jesus Christ and to live a life of love and grace.

Light has special meaning to us today, as we think about Jesus Christ, the light of the world, symbolized by our candles on the altar. Worship begins with the acolyte bringing in the light of Christ and leaving it before us. At the end of our time together this morning, the acolyte will come and carry Christ’s light out into the world before us, as a reminder that even “out there,” God is with us. Our memorial candle reminds us of the light of God’s love shown to us by the saints of God whom we remember today, the light which lives on in us, which we bear to the world. That’s a lot of symbolism for such little one-syllable words: light. world. candle. Christ. love. saint. blessed.

I can't read today's scripture passages without thinking of a couple of things: first, I remember the poster of the Beatitudes hanging on the wall in the room where I went to Vacation Bible School at First United Methodist Church in Milan TN. It was the same poster, every year, and showed a shepherd on a hillside. I don't know what the picture had to do with the text, but that's what I remember. The other thing I think of is the benediction in Matthew, in the 25th chapter, given to the good stewards of the Master's talents: "well done, good and faithful servant."

In that blessing, I hear an echo of the Beatitudes, which are themselves a kind of benediction. In a sense, Matthew puts what could have been Jesus' last words right here at the beginning of this teaching discourse: Blessed are you. How honorable. Well done. These are less words for how God's people were right that minute (or how we are, right this minute) than a preview of what we might hope God's words would be when we meet him...they tell us almost more about who God is, than about who we are...and they tell us who we are meant to be becoming—a people set apart, yet still living in this world, with different values, different ideals, and a different end in mind than what we might hear from our culture. We use some particular language to describe our differentness: we are

Christians, we are called to be saints, we are all children of God. Today we celebrate both the people and the God that set us apart in this way.

All Saints has a particular resonance for me this year. My paternal grandmother died in March this year. My two grandmothers, even though they lived in the same small town in Tennessee, were very different. My mother's mother was looked up to by all the Methodist women in town. She helped with the Mustard Seed thrift store, could be counted on to cook whenever needed, and faithfully attended the Methodist church in town. She was the one who made sure we got to Vacation Bible School every summer. On All Saints Day, I remember her as the one who taught my mother, and taught me, about doing things for other people, and not just for ourselves. She could be hard, but Frances Mathis was a saint in our lives, and in the lives of many others. People looked up to her. Her descendants still do. She was an example to us, not a perfect one, but a good one, of what it means to be a saint: she taught us right and wrong, to reach out to others in generosity and kindness, to love God, to attend church. All excellent lessons.

Mary Kathryn Walker, however, was a more unlikely saint. While she loved God her entire life, she also struggled emotionally and physically. My father's mother suffered from depression that was sometimes poorly

controlled. She was an addict in recovery most of my life, and I remember going to AA meetings with her (back in the basement of the Methodist church, although she was a Baptist). She was a faithful attender of church, but I have very few memories of going to the Baptist church with her. She was often frightened and sad, worried about almost everything, and taught me an awful lot about love, and grace, and where God is, even when we think he isn't. There were days when she locked herself in the bathroom and cried for hours. There were times we went to Shoney's for hot fudge cake, because there she could smoke the cigarette she wouldn't smoke at home. Life for her was sometimes precarious...she rarely felt like she had a sense of balance, that everything was going well, that she was in control of her life. And yet she loved with an open heart. From my mother's mother, I learned what sin was, what I needed to avoid, what would get me in trouble. From my father's mother, I learned that even in sin, sickness, and weakness, God is gracious to love us, sustain us, and forgive us.

That's really what I think the Beatitudes and All Saints Day have to tell us: where God is, and who God is, even in the grittiest reality of our lives. They teach us the qualities of God by example, in their stories and their responses to the challenges of life. A pastor and poet I know puts it this way:

In a world that is often cruel
I find myself on the outs
Not making the buck
(Blessed are you)
not having the things
I am told I must have
To be me
(Blessed are you)
and in the fast flowing lanes of this world
I am often in the slow lane
Stopping occasionally to smell the flowers
And see the creation
God had made
(Blessed are you)
and when the bus stops
and I never get the good seat
because I am helping someone who is having trouble
with old age
or weak limbs
I wonder at those who do
(Blessed are you)
---- and Christ said
---- let the little children come unto me
---- and forbid them not
---- for to such belongs the Kingdom of God
(Blessed are you)*

Where is God? Who is God in our lives? Who are we? When we are feeling poor in spirit, when we mourn, when we are meek, when we seek righteousness...God is there. For those who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, God is there. When life is at its hardest, when things are at their toughest, when we suffer poverty and loss like my mother's mother or sickness and struggle like my father's mother, God is there. When we are

at our best, being the most grace-filled and loving children of God, God is there with us. And when we are at our worst, most in need of blessing, tired and worn and afraid and ill, God is there. And these women who taught me first and foremost that God is always there in whatever they went through in their lives are among the saints I look up to, who I remember today, who have made me who I am and given me the confidence that God is with me, in my strength and in my brokenness.

That's the meaning of a saint, and that's the nature of God. Not that we can't come up with God-like qualities like perfect, loving, kind, although those are good and right and true. But there is more to a saint, and more to God, than just the easy stuff. God is bigger and better than just the easy stuff. The Beatitudes remind us too that God is there when we are persecuted, when life wears us down and wears us out, when our retirement fund is wiped out or we're worried about who the next president is going to be, when orders come through to send a loved one to a war zone or the doctor brings bad news, when the car breaks down or the stock market breaks down, when a child is killed senselessly...God is always there. These are lessons we learn from those people who have been saints in our lives, not only what not to do, but what faith really means: believing in what we often cannot see, but know to be true: that God's love is constant,

that God's mercy is infinite, that God's grace is ever present, that we can never go so far as to get away from God.

To go back to that pastor-poet I know,

Blessed are we
Blessed in the midst of God's love
Blessed in the midst of our world
Blessed in what we feel
See
Do
Blessed
Even in the times we find it hard
To see
The blessing
Even then
We can know ourselves
As the children of God
Especially then
We can know
See
Feel
God's presence in our lives
Blessed
God's love in our lives
Given by the One
Who came to save
Blessed are you
In the name of Christ*

If the goal of the Christian life is to take our places as saints in the lives of others, then we can hope to hear the words of the Beatitudes as our own benediction.

Blessed are we, for we have found strength in our faith when the world made us weak.

Blessed are we, for we have brought joy and hope to others.

Blessed are we, for we hold to our faith in the face of all the fear, pain, doubt, and shame that life can bring us.

Blessed are we, when we seek to do God's will before our own, to let God's perfect love replace our imperfect striving.

Blessed are we, for we share our relationship with God with others, in words, in actions, and in love.

For ours is the kingdom of heaven, the presence of God, the reality of grace and mercy in a world that is rarely gracious and merciful, but where God is always with us.

*Thanks to Pastor Dan of coslcgrace.blogspot.com