

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Young Brian, age five, had heard the story of the pillar-monk, Symeon the stylite, who lived atop a pillar for 37 years near Aleppo, in Sunday School. Captivated by this approach to seeking God's approval, the boy decided to imitate him. His mother interrupted his holy pilgrimage by explaining, "Brian, get down off that stool on the table before you break your neck." Brian complied but went storming from the room announcing, "You can't even become a saint in your own home!"

As most of you likely know already, today is recognized as All-Saints Day. What is a saint? Who is a saint? In the New Testament, we find that the word "saint" is used only to refer to all Christians. For example, we find that the apostle Paul wrote in the introduction of his letter to the Ephesians: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, **to the saints who are in Ephesus.**" In the New Testament, the word "saint" is never used to refer to the best, most virtuous, or most faithful as in St. Mary or St. Peter. The idea that there is a group of super Christians who are called saints simply is not biblical.

The New Testament tells us a saint is one who has been "sanctified"—one who has been purified and made holy by baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul implies this when he writes to the church in Corinth: "You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God." (1 Corinthians 6:11)

From this New Testament understanding, we can conclude that every Christian is a saint. Therefore, All Saints Day is not a day to celebrate a sort of "Christian Hall of Fame." Rather, it is a day to celebrate that all of us are purified and made holy in Jesus Christ not by our own accomplishments, but by the free grace of God in his son Jesus. It is a day to remember those saints who are living now, including those separated from us, those who live now in the heavenly presence of God and our Savior Jesus Christ.

Martha Hubbard, wrote the following in an article, "For All the Saints," for the July-August 1999 copy of *Presbyterians Today*.

"Each year I celebrate All Saints' Day by writing a letter to one of the 'saints' in my life, telling that person how he or she has helped me to be the person of faith that I am.

"One year I was mentally preparing my letter for Dr. Tracy Luke, a religion professor at Alma College, when I learned of his death. He had been such a strong influence in my life and in my calling as a director of Christian Education that I wrote the letter to his wife, telling her about the impact her husband had on my young life.

"Another year I wrote my sixth-grade public school teacher. I did not directly learn about faith from him, but his encouragement, support and love showed each day as I emerged from being a shy adolescent. His creative activities in the classroom helped me on the path to my future career. The letters are written in thankful appreciation to God for the people who have been a part of my journey."

It's interesting to think about what I would write in letters I would send to those saints who have impacted my life in significant ways. What was it about who they were—what they said and what they did that caught my attention and changed my life somehow? Who would you write to, and what is it about them that impacted you? Saints, we find, do not live for themselves—they live for God's purposes in leading others to him.

One of the recommended scripture readings for today, the Matthew 5:1-12 text, which was read for you this morning is one of those texts that paints a picture of how one who has been

purified and made holy by Jesus strives to live. We call these twelve verses the Beatitudes. They are the opening of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount.

Prior to this text, we find Jesus in the early part of his ministry announcing that the kingdom of heaven has come near and he invites people to repent, to turn away from their lives of self-centeredness and “self” control and to turn themselves over to Christ’s direction and control.

We also read that Jesus invited the first of his disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John, to follow him, which they did. Their lives would never be the same. Accepting this invitation pulled them out of their own private worlds and placed them right in the flow of the broader world—both the good and the bad things of the world. Their new mission was to participate with Jesus in the building of God’s kingdom. It is the same mission those we know as saints chose to accept and the same mission Christians are called to today.

This then sets the stage for the Beatitudes as they define the qualities of those who will follow Christ. If we look closely at the Beatitudes we notice that they seem to build on one another. The 20th-century missionary, E. Stanley Jones, observed that you could really divide these nine Beatitudes into three sets of three with each set of three Beatitudes following the same pattern. The first presents a premise or a theory, the second suggests the opposite of that theory and the third in the set offers the fusion of the first two. When you look at them in this way, you begin to see that Jesus is laying the foundation for followers to take on social responsibility in helping to build God's kingdom here on earth.

The first set of three begins with the premise: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does it mean to be "poor in spirit". A good way to understand what this means is to take a look at how Jesus lived. To be "poor in spirit" combines three of Jesus' traits: servanthood, obedience and self-denial.

Those who are poor in spirit in the biblical sense are those who recognize that he or she has nothing to offer God on his or her own. He or she knows that his or her life has no purpose apart from God. They obey God not out of obligation, but out of a desire to gain something better—life with God. The poor in spirit are those who voluntarily empty themselves so that they can be filled by God.

This then leads into the second beatitude, which directs our attention from ourselves to those around us: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Disciples who are poor in spirit, who have turned their attention away from themselves, now turn their attention to the world and begin to see it as it is—a world in pain, a world where the selfish desire of sin dehumanizes people, a world full of violence, a world that has given up hope of things ever getting any better. Those who mourn are blessed because they are able to enter into the world's pain and grief and are not afraid of it.

We come then to the third beatitude: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." We tend to think of meekness as being wimpy. But here meekness is a combination of the previous two characteristics described in the first two beatitudes: the power and attitude of self-denial in the poor in spirit, and the passion for the pain of the world in those who mourn. Those who want nothing from the world and, at the same time, are willing to share everything with it are the meek.

The spirit of self-denial and the spirit of service in the meek come together to make a new being—a being who is powerful because he or she can't be tempted or bought by the evil in this world. They are willing to go to any length, even to death, for the sake of others.

Jesus then turns to another set of three beatitudes that follow the same pattern: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness" is the theory; "Blessed are the merciful" is the opposite of the that theory; and "Blessed are the pure in heart" is the combination of the two. Whereas the first three beatitudes gave us a pattern for emptying ourselves, this set of three teaches us with what we are to be filled.

It's helpful to our understanding to note that another way of translating the Greek word for righteousness is "justice." Those who hunger and thirst are in the business of seeking justice for others. In other words, the people of God aren't just those who do good; they do good for a purpose—to bring God's justice into the world.

They do the will of God, but they see God's will as being bigger than themselves. They're not as concerned about their own eternal destiny as they are about the destiny of the whole creation. They're less focused on justifying themselves than participating in God's justice for those who need it most.

The second beatitude in this set of three is "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" which builds on the principle of seeking justice. Those who have hungered and thirsted for God's justice must begin to show mercy to those who need that justice the most. When you put the passion for justice and the compassion of mercy together, you become the "pure in heart."

These are the ones who are blessed to "see God" because they see the movement of God and the purpose of God in every person. They see God everywhere because they are always looking for ways in which to live out God's purpose through obedience, mercy, service and love.

The third set of three includes "Blessed are the peacemakers"; "Blessed are those who are persecuted"; and "Blessed are you when people insult you." Take the meek who want nothing from the world, and the pure in heart who want nothing but God. Put them together and you get peacemakers!

If peacemakers are the premise in this third set of beatitudes then the opposite are those who are persecuted. Jesus says that a) if you're a peacemaker, you are blessed! But Jesus also says, b), if you are a persecuted peacemaker, you're blessed again!

The final beatitude, verse 11, is a variation of the previous one. You're blessed yet again if, after being persecuted because of your peacemaking, you are insulted and slandered by others. History tells us that anyone who acts as a peacemaker will usually become one of the persecuted. Jesus is the ultimate example of that truth. We are told the peacemakers and those who are persecuted in the end will find joy because they will find favor with God and live in his kingdom—not the darkness and sin of this world.

In fact, all who embody all of the qualities Jesus details in the Beatitudes, find joy. They find joy in knowing they are walking directly in the footsteps of Jesus. And changing the world.

The poor in spirit. The mourning. The meek. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The pure in heart. The merciful. The peacemakers. The persecuted peacemakers. The slandered, insulted, and persecuted peacemakers are the saints of God who worked to change the world.

The saints we remember today began this work, and we can continue building on it. We do not walk alone as we take on this mission. We have a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on—their spirits inspiring us. And as was the case for them, we also have the Spirit of Christ, leading the way. Let's make it so. Amen.