

Highland Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday after Pentecost – November 5, 2023
“For All the Saints”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Revelation 7:9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

This morning, I am going to read the Message version of Matthew’s beatitudes because I think it is a well-known scripture that can sometimes become too well-known. I hope that this translation along with the song we just sang will allow the words to fall fresh upon our ears. Listen now for the word of God:

“When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. God is food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Happiness has become a science in recent decades. Neurochemistry, brain studies, and the ever-present consumer sciences, have tried to describe and prescribe a sort of anatomy of happiness. Algorithms determine which ads pop up on your web browser to appeal to your daily happiness quota or that one weird thing that you happened to Google that one time...

We want to be happy. We think we *should* be happy. We are often shocked to find out that what we *want* does not make us happy. There’s also a culture of what we now know as toxic happiness or toxic positivity where because we think we should be happy all the time, we

start spewing platitudes to try and cover any negative feelings that we or someone else might be feeling.

Some translations of the Bible use the word “happy” in place of “blessed” in the Beatitudes. The word “happy” focuses our emphasis on the present state of the people that are listening. While blessedness can sound like a future promise of good things to those who suffer now, “happiness” makes sense as something people strive for in this lifetime.

I don’t know that happy is the perfect translation here, simply because of our culture of conveying a thin, ‘happy-go-lucky’ kind of happiness. This is not what ancient philosophers meant, for they were well aware of the suffering and conflict humans experience. It cannot be what Jesus means either, or he would not call those who mourn “happy.” Instead, he is describing a deeper happiness, the kind of happiness that only comes from aligning one’s own will with God’s.

New Testament professor Margaret Aymer has translated this word as “greatly honored.” This is a little more helpful translation because it emphasizes the theme of reversal that is implied in the Beatitudes. The meek and the merciful are not revered by the world’s standards, but they are honored by God and by those who would align their lives with God’s ways. The saints that we are honoring might not have received much honor in their lifetime, but they are given the highest honor in God’s world.

Jesus begins his teaching, not with promises of happiness, but with promises of blessedness or honor even, in those incredibly hard human experiences of mourning, meekness, peacemaking, persecution, and poverty of spirit. Jesus’ form of “blessedness” only makes sense in light of the kingdom of God.

Within God’s kingdom, honor does not depend on wealth or health or status. It is not a reward for righteousness or duty. Rather, blessedness is God’s sheer gift. In the realm of God, life is not governed by righteousness and shame, but by the promise of abundant life. Mourning, poverty of spirit, and meekness reveal this inbreaking of God’s abundant life. When we have eyes to see our lives within the kingdom of God, it’s like pushing the reset button.

“Kingdom of God” is a rich image that Jesus uses as shorthand to convey a full-blown re-ordering of reality. However, this “kingdom” language misleads us about the very nature of the eschatological life of God and can be confusing to wrap our minds around. Most of us have never lived in a “kingdom,” under a monarchy, so the word “kingdom” removes us from our everyday, concrete lives and instead places us into the fairytale world of kings and knights, princesses, and castles. Plus, the term carries patriarchal and hierarchical overtones. “Kings” get a bad rap in the Old Testament, New Testament, and church history. So, we justifiably object to describing the life of God with an image so burdened by the crimes of empire. “Kingdom” language rarely points us to the disruptive, abundant life Jesus promises.

The implication of Jesus blessing the poor, the marginalized, is not that they should be happy in their deprivation. These beatitudes are more an indictment on the society of the time

for having forgotten its responsibility toward the neighbor. It is a warning to God's people. It is a call to accountability. If God blesses the ones that you curse, there is something fundamentally wrong with your theology.

On All Saints Day, the Beatitudes testify that it matters deeply whom we call "saint." The realm Jesus proclaimed and embodied is precisely a new way of seeing, a new way of naming, and so a new way of being. Our current world sweeps aside those Jesus declares blessed by God, but we are invited to look again and discern a new reality that is coming into being. When we learn to recognize such people as blessed — to call them saints — we pledge our allegiance to that new world even as we participate in this one.

The thing that is incredible about our cloud of witnesses is that they are always present, even if they are not physically here. This morning, I lit a candle for my good friend Johnna and my grandmother Jackie, both of whom died in the last two months. But the memories, their wisdom, tenacity, joy, stubbornness, and laughter live on. Although some of the saints we celebrate are dead and rest from their labors, they still live and move within us. And calling them saints does not mean that they were perfect, because I can tell you some stories... but it does mean that they are greatly honored, because they were human and because they fought the good fight.

They continue to fight with us, and at our sides, as we fight for justice and liberation and equality; as we struggle with God to build a world where there is peace with equity; a world where all people can have bread with dignity; freedom with liberation; love with power and justice. A kinder, gentler nation, a nation that cares about its children and youth and will help them to have love in their hearts, and knowledge in their heads; a nation that will take care of its elderly, its widows and orphans and houseless, the unemployed, and the poor, and where no one will be denied care.

We take time today to remember the saints who have given our lives meaning and purpose and given us the ability to believe in ourselves and to believe in God. Those who have gone on before are part of the tie that binds, a part of the fellowship of kindred minds. They are one with our hopes, our aims, our fears, our cares. These bygone generations are the makeup of the clouds of witnesses. They are the ones who died in the faith still hoping for the promise.

The Beatitudes invite us into that hopefulness. We place our hope in Christ, who offered hope to the hopeless. Therefore, we are able to approach the world with a spirit of hope, even when the outward signs indicate otherwise. When we are hopeful, we stand in the world surrounded by those who have gone before us, sure of the possibility that the day will come when mercy, humility, peace, and love are the descriptions of what it means to live. Amen.