

The Beatitudes

5 When Jesus^[a] saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Salt and Light

¹³“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

November 5, 2017 – All Saints Sunday

“Your Blessed Saints”

Matthew 5:1-16

Kerra Becker English

Happy are those who are rich in things, for theirs is whatever they want.

Happy are those who keep a stiff upper lip, for they will never be thought of as weak.

Happy are the assertive, for they will have all the earth’s resources at their disposal.

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for revenge, for they will be satisfied by brutal punishments.

Happy are the heartless, for they won’t be fooled by emotion or religion.

Happy are the war mongers, for they will be called victorious on God’s side.

Happy are those who persecute others for righteousness sake, for they know the kingdom of heaven is theirs alone.

Happy are those who revile others and persecute others and utter all kinds of evil against others in Jesus’ name. Enjoy yourselves, for you know you’re going to be the best heaven has to offer. Those prophets that weren’t popular were no prophets at all.

It makes us uncomfortable to hear the beatitudes read in reverse, doesn’t it? It made me cringe a bit to try to figure out just what the opposites would be. And yet, when we think about it, perhaps

those attitudes are not all that uncommon in our world today. The rich are thought to be far happier and more blessed than the poor. We have been taught that people deserve their socio-economic status – be it rich or poor. We also avoid those who seem too sad or too unsure of themselves. We build more prisons and find more ways to cultivate revenge than encourage righteousness. We are skeptical of the work of the heart that teaches us to trust our feelings and maybe even trust in God. We continue to rattle our sabers whether it's for military purposes or just to troll those who understand the world differently.

Now my study Bible had this commentary to say about the whole Sermon on the Mount, *“More than providing information about God’s will and motivating disciples to do it, the sermon offers visions of God’s empire. It sketches life in an alternative community marked by justice, transformed social relationships, practices of piety, and shared and accessible resources. Life under Rome’s imperial rule with vast discrepancies of wealth and much injustice is not God’s will.”* I read that, and thought immediately, “YES. Yes, that’s it.”

But I dare say that footnote spoke to me so loudly and clearly because I had just attended the Clergy Convocation at Richmond Hill with speaker Lisa Sharon Harper. Lisa Harper has been contracted through several Richmond faith-based organizations to help the whole of the Metropolitan area address the deep need for racial reconciliation. The city has obtained a grant

from the Kellogg Foundation to do this work, and after hearing her speak, I have a tremendous amount of hope for what we might be able to do as faith leaders, and educators, and citizens come together to make a difference by changing the usual narrative. Not only was she an amazingly gifted preacher and speaker, she talked about a plan, and this plan could have easily come straight from a study of the beatitudes, and it certainly came from her tremendous knowledge of scripture as a whole.

After her initial talk based on her book, “The Very Good Gospel,” she asked us to form small groups to look at three things. First, we were to consider the core lies that affect our city. What is it that we all believe, but really isn’t true about who we are as the children of God? Then she asked us to consider what we thought were the most egregious manifestations of those lies. And then she asked us to consider what spiritual truths counteract those lies. Though it sounds rather simple, it was a powerful, powerful exercise.

Though each group had different things to say overall, nearly every small group pointed out the same core lie as significant in the lives of people who live in our area: we believe that the world works in such a way that people get what they deserve. It’s not surprising. Many of us have that built into our family narratives as the truth. If you work hard, and do good, you will have bounty come your way, but if you slack off and are lazy and make bad choices, you will end up in poverty

and your life will be a wreck. I know I grew up believing that to be true. To some degree, I still have some confessing to do around that issue. I want to believe that I have made it on my own, but I know now that's not the complete truth. Because I have learned that it's not just by my own awesomeness that I was able to get a good education, and live in a comfortable house, and have my kids go to good schools, and be able to pay off my bills every month. My grandfather loaned us money to buy our first house. My parents could afford to send me to college in the way back when college was about a third of the price it is now. And I could probably list a whole bunch of other advantages – advantages that some children were not lucky enough by the occasion of their birth to have. Do I get what I deserve? Sometimes? Maybe? But I also know that I've had advantages that were a given, not earned, and I also know that those who are born into circumstances that set them up to have a hard life really don't deserve to have their lives rigged in that way.

For the next part of our exercise, we considered how believing that people get what they deserve plays out in destructive ways in our larger community. In our school systems across the city and surrounding counties, we must believe that this is true because we have let some kids get a very different education than other kids. If they didn't deserve it, why would we continue? It's a good question to ask ourselves. Perhaps we blame the parents for not working hard enough or moving to a better school district. Perhaps we think that kids should be able to acquire an education even

in falling down schools with little to no resources. But I know a lot of parents in my daughter's school system who believe their kids are getting exactly what they deserve – a great education with fabulous teachers and new playground equipment every other year. It's not the same in Richmond city elementary schools, and there may even be different circumstances in Ashland depending on what kids live where. Our public school system, a system that should be a place of equality and hope for the future, has become more segregated than ever, and we have made it that way through a number of legal policies and procedures. What parent doesn't want a good, safe school with caring teachers and the resources to make education meaningful for their child? Do only well-off children deserve that chance? I don't think so.

Finally, we were to come up with spiritual, scriptural, deeply understood truths that spoke directly against the lies. Ms. Harper reminded us that that's how systems change. The lie has to be exposed as a lie. Otherwise, we keep putting band-aids on the symptoms and may not relieve the real problems. So we wouldn't get too discouraged, she also reminded us that any solution we try is at least taking a step. Charity is important work – filling backpacks and setting up a lunch train are steps in the right direction for helping kids in our region. But then again, so is getting to the justice that makes a turn-around in how we actually understand the world and imagine a world where all children, all GOD'S children have a fighting chance to use all their gifts and become everything they have the potential to be.

Which gets me back to the text we have in front of us today. These verses from the Sermon on the Mount are at the very heart of how Jesus envisions what the world could grow up to be. He is casting a vision of an alternative kingdom, an empire that isn't dependent on an Emperor or a government, a reality that would change the very nature of the inequalities that so mark our world yet today. Jesus' sayings are the truths that run counter to the lies, the lies that are as familiar to us as they were popular in Jesus' own time, which turn his truths into dangerous truths. Promoting this vision made him rather unpopular. This Sermon of his still ruffles feathers.

And yet the people that he's talking about – the poor in Spirit, the mourners, the meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and allow the taunts of this world to fall away when they are seeking justice are the amazing people who we can see now are the saints. They are the salt of the earth, the light of the world. They live into the scary truth and disbelieve the lies the world holds up as “just the way things are.”

When I graduated from high school, my parents, who took out a Senior ad in the yearbook, either blessed or cursed me with those ending verses of this passage to be salt, to be light, to not lose my saltiness and to put the light within on a lampstand for all the world to see. I'm not sure I always do that to the best of my ability. But I do try to recognize those gifts now in others, the ones that

remind me that shedding tears and showing mercy are gifts – not liabilities. They are the calm and collected peacemakers who may get called names but let it roll off like water. I do want to grow up to be like the Blessed ones of this list. I want to aspire to plant the seeds in community that will grow into this reality. I yearn to see Christ’s vision – indeed it is the hope that is needed as we expose the flip side of these truths as our world’s most pernicious lies. Right now, as we are living into a time when the truth is highly obscured or outright rejected, it is up to us to proclaim Christ’s vision – AGAIN. Even if it’s not believed right away, or maybe even if it’s not believed in very wide circles at all, we can preach God’s kingdom, God’s empire in the midst of our global world trying to figure out truth from lies and authenticity from grabbing at power. Be that blessing in the world. Be salt. Be light. Be the saints that Christ is calling you to be. And as you grow in the likeness and image of Christ, it will grow this vision Christ had of the world into a new reality.

Amen.

INVITATION TO THE TABLE – KERRA (MAJESTY, MEMORY, MYSTERY)

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

MAJESTY - ANDREW

Minister: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Minister: Lift up your hearts.

People: We lift them to the Lord.

Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

People: It is right to give God thanks and praise.

Minister: It is truly right and our greatest joy to give you thanks and praise

O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe. We praise you for saints and martyrs, for the faithful in every age who have followed your Son and witnessed to his resurrection. From every race and tongue, from every people and nation, you have gathered them into your kingdom. You have shown them the path of life and filled them with the joy of your presence. How glorious is your heavenly realm where the multitude of your saints rejoice with Christ!

MEMORY - KERRA

Introducing some silence to remember.... Then...

Remembering all your mighty and merciful acts, we take this bread and this wine from the gifts you have given us, and celebrate with joy the redemption won for us in Jesus Christ. Accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving as a living and holy offering of ourselves, that our lives may proclaim the One crucified and risen.

Great is the mystery of our faith: **Christ has died. Christ is risen.**

Christ will come again.

MYSTERY – ANDREW

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By your Spirit unite us with the living Christ, and with all who are baptized in his name, that we may be one in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.

Intercessions for the church and the world may be included here.

Number us among your saints, O God, and join us with the faithful of every age, that strengthened by their witness and supported by their fellowship, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Give us strength to serve you faithfully until the promised day of resurrection, when with the redeemed of all the ages we will feast with you at your table in glory.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty God, now and forever.

The Lords' s Prayer:

And we ask that you hear us now as we pray the prayer our Lord taught us to pray, saying: Our Father, who art in heaven.... **Amen.**

Andrew: We give you thanks that the Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, took bread, and after giving thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying:

Take, eat.

This is my body, given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

Kerra: In the same way he took the cup, saying: This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.

These are the gifts of God for the people of God.