

Standing on Their Shoulders **November 1, 2020**

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Texts: 1 John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12

Before we begin reflecting on our passage for today I'd like to share a gift from one of the saints in my life. This little booklet was my grandfather's when he was in the army working on railroads in Texas. He kept it in his shirt pocket, right next to his heart. My grandmother gave it to me when he passed a couple of years ago. It's filled with scripture quotes and on the front it says "Happy is the Man who..." On this All Saints Day, I thought it was appropriate to share as we will be talking about the Beatitudes today. I keep it by my home altar to remind me of his faithful wisdom and gentleness that are still with me even though he's not physically with us anymore.

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer!

Today is All Saints Day and All Saints Sunday. This is a miracle of the calendar that happens every once in a while, where the actual All Saints Day falls on a Sunday. Normally if All Saints Day fell during the week we would celebrate on one of the Sundays surrounding it, but this year is different. It lends a sort of intensity to the observance of the day I think. This All Saints Day doesn't just stand out because I'm indulging my nerdiness about calendar dates and liturgical observances. It is profoundly different for a much more somber and sobering reason. The immensity of loss of life this year has been overwhelming as we turn to honor and give thanks for the lives and deaths of those who have passed away and have entered into the cloud of witnesses that are forever with us. We are also celebrating All Saints Day in the looming shadow of the upcoming election, holding with us fears and anxieties about the uncertainty and possible civil unrest in the days to come. We can draw on some solidarity from our siblings in faith who wrote our first reading for today as they too were experiencing a season of division in their wider community. We can also more imminently lean on the presence of one another, the everyday saints in our midst. Even with our hearts weighed down with worry we turn to the practices of our tradition and look to scripture for God's Word to speak to us and ground us in this time.

Our gospel passage for today's worship is from the Gospel of Matthew. It is one of the more well-known sections of the New Testament, the introduction to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, otherwise called the Beatitudes. This gospel often portrays Jesus as Teacher and so in that spirit I want to share some wisdom that a Rabbi once taught me. She herself had learned this from one of her spiritual teachers years ago. When asked about the value of being a part of a religious community she described our faith traditions as large barge ships- the kind that travel across the Atlantic Ocean to carry supplies overseas. And she said, "the traditions of our faith --like large ships--- carry us through the stormy waters safely whereas if we tried to get in a row boat and make a go of it ourselves it would be near impossible to get to where we needed to go." This image of our faith traditions, of our practice of Christianity as sturdy ships keeping us afloat in icy waters instantly delighted me. The lives of the people who have come before us have built up a foundation of practices, of good theology, of joy, and of ways of relating to one another that guide us through our experience of this life. We aren't meant to go about navigating these deep and stormy waters alone. Our saints who have come before us have given us this precious gift of being formed and shaped by each other, by our love, by our grief, by past wisdom and by this calling to faith that we all share.

These saints, these people just like you and me, are called blessed by the church or in other words Beatified. Jesus calls unexpected people blessed in our text for today too. These people who are

mourning, who are poor in spirit, who are meek and merciful are the last people we would assume would be blessed and yet in God's eyes they are. This perplexing description of people who have lost so much as being blessed leads us to a curiosity about this word blessed. Oftentimes when looking at the Beatitudes we get sidetracked by this alluring word blessed right at the front of the sentence. We wonder, what does it mean to be blessed? How has this word been used before in our scripture? Does it mean fortunate or something else entirely? We find in our dictionaries from prior uses that it could mean happy or on the right track with God. And while these questions are worthy ones and tell us a lot about the context of this unique stylized introduction to Jesus' sermon today I want to draw our attention to sentence structure. I know. Another thrilling grammar adventure.

Jesus switches his verb tenses from active to passive every line, alternating roles for the people he is calling blessed. He says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." He says those in mourning will be comforted, but this begs the question, by who? Inherent in that passive verb is the existence of relationship. And the pronoun agent here is kept ambiguous. It could be either God who is comforting these people or others in their community, or both. A part of their blessedness is that they are in relationship with their community. That being said, the blessed ones, the ones who are mourning and who are trying their best to make peace in a broken world aren't wholly without agency. In fact they are also acting in ways that bring them closer to God either by their ability to see God more clearly or in their possession of their right to their place in God's kingdom like in verses 3 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. and verse 8 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When we ask ourselves the question, what does it mean to be blessed-- I don't think that there is one singular easy answer. It's certainly not what our larger society would lead us to believe- that nothing bad ever happens to us, that the gospel that we preach is popular, or that we don't struggle with our mental or physical health in times of crisis.

While I don't think this is the whole of what it means to be blessed I can offer us a starting place for today. To be blessed, in part, means to be in relationship with one another, to be blessed, in part, means to be so deeply grounded in God's abiding love and liberation that we see God in our neighbor, in the lives of our loved ones past and present, and at work in the spiritual practices that have been handed down to us through the generations. To be blessed means to have your heart open enough to let yourself be comforted in moments of grief. To dare to be a peacemaker when all you want to do is yell at your crazy uncle or badger your parent or child to wear a mask out of worry for their safety. To listen to the small whisper of courage to claim your expression of your faith when it's inconvenient to do so. To be soft in a world that values perfection and to share that softness with one another is a blessing in itself. These states of being are grounded in a deep faith and trust in God and an acknowledgment of the fact that our existence is bound up in one another, that we are responsible to one another as children of God.

At Jaz's suggestion during her sermon from last week I went and listened to the Keep Going Song by the Begnsons and I fell in love with it. These words kept echoing in my head and my heart as I thought about what we can and do learn from our relationships with those who have gone before us and those who walk beside us. The part goes like this:

I pray my pain is a river

That flows to the ocean

That connects my pain to yours

And I pray I pray my happiness is like pollen

That flies to you and pollinates your joy oh boy

Oh boy is that possible?

Yes! My answer is yes. I believe that our cloud of witnesses teaches us that this is indeed possible. Not only possible but foundational to the survival of our humanness.

Abigail, the soloist, continues to sing that we are making this up as we go. And in one sense we are, but we aren't starting from scratch. As we look towards our future we are standing on the shoulders of our ancestors in faith. As we figure things out as we go we are bearing our siblings in Christ along in the work when they can't go on themselves and we in turn are blessed with the same gift of companionship in our time of need. On this All Saints Day we are reaching our hearts backwards to the experiences of those who have gone before us and we stand on their strength now so that we might connect our pain to the pain of our neighbor. And when we find that glimpse of happiness, that taste of new life in the midst of all that the world is right now my deepest hope and prayer is that we share that happiness, that blessedness so that it might pollinate all of our joy. Amen.