

“EVERY DAY SAINTS”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: Matthew 5:1-12 (NLT)

God’s Word: 1 John 3:1-3 (NLT)

5 One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, ² and he began to teach them.

3 “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

4 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

6 God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,^[b] for they will be satisfied.

7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

10 God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

11 “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. ¹² Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way.

This week I read a status update on Facebook. The post was put there by a friend of mine. He said, “It is very telling who stops when you have run your car into the ditch on the side of the road. It wasn’t what would be termed the cream of society, that’s for sure.” The responses to that status were interesting, to say the least. People wanted to know if my friend was okay. Others were asking what happened and if the person who stopped was hoping for a handout in return. Others told stories of how the most unexpected people had helped them out in a time of need. It turns out that my friend had very gently backed his car into a ditch trying to execute a U-turn in a rural area near where he lived. Thankfully, he

was okay, as was the car, but it was a most unlikely person, Gary, who stopped to check on my friend. As my friend described Gary, he was not the cream of society. We can imagine what Gary was like; perhaps tattooed, worn clothing, run-down car, rough language. But Gary didn't ask for any handouts. My friend said the questions he asked were in order, "Are you okay? Do you have a phone? Is someone coming or can I help?" My friend had what he needed, and someone was on the way to help, but Gary was a saint, however unlikely, who took a moment to offer help, just when my friend needed it. And how many such people do we know? The unlikeliest of folks who would go out of their way to help another.

We recall this morning the stories of saints, stories like my friend's, stories of people who have gone out of their way to teach us, to help us, to change our lives; people who have blessed us in just the right ways at just the right times. These saints that we lift up are often unexpected, and act in unexpected ways, but in doing so they capture the essence of Jesus' words found here in Matthew. Like these Beatitudes, the lives of saints show the works and ways of a God who is full of surprises.

Jesus' words in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount describe those who find their being in the eternal God. The message of the Beatitudes is that it's what we are that really counts, not what we possess or have done. And all these characteristics Jesus describes are a result of our being in Christ. When we really take a look at these promises of the kingdom of God, and also the descriptions of those who receive the promises, we find that we get a sneak peek into God's kingdom. You see, the Beatitudes are primarily about the character of God and God's kingdom, but they are also about the character of Christians. Because God behaves in the way God does, a person would be foolish not to act in the way the Beatitudes recommend. And to live the Beatitudes is to live in faith. We have faith that God really does bless the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. And when people have such faith in God, they begin to live into that faith in a way that they not only see the blessings of God happening all around them, but they become a part of those blessings, experiencing them themselves, even as they share them with others. And these are the people we come to know and celebrate as saints!

As you think of the saints in your life, is that not the kind of people they are? People who are sharing God's blessings in this world and even go out of their way to do so! These are the saints we celebrate today! We celebrate martyrs because they die for the faith, we celebrate saints because they live for the faith. Now and then some figure rises on the human scene who does approximate the incredible ideals of Jesus—a Francis of Assisi, going with radiant joy upon God's way when he left all the cluttering things of this earth behind; a Martin Luther King, Jr., attaining a peace and power of soul beyond all common measurement, because he had cleansed his heart from hate and from every thought of

violence and had committed himself completely to the persuasive power of love. But I'm not just talking about St. John or St. Mary or St. Francis or St. Teresa. I'm talking about Mom and Dad, and Rennay; Aunt Billie and Uncle Horace, Aunt Mary and Uncle Don, and Granny, and Zoe, Wesley, and Bella, and _____.

The celebration of All Saints' Day is not just a celebration of the lives of people who are now gone, it is a celebration of all those people who have walked faithfully with Christ! It is a celebration of all who have experienced poverty, hunger, grief, and hatred because of the gospel. It is a celebration of all who love their enemies in that profound way that Jesus calls us to; modeling the extravagant generosity that we are all to be about as followers of Christ.

The kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious and absurd selflessness. Think of the very best thing you can do for a person most in need and go ahead and do it! That's basically what he's calling us to do in these words recorded by Matthew! Think of the blessing you would really like to receive from someone else, and then go and do it for them. Think of the people to whom you are tempted to be mean and nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead. It's crazy!!! But that's what this passage in Matthew is all about, and these are the things that saints do day after day as they seek to follow Christ. It's really amazing! To think of loving in this way and treating people, even our worst enemies, with love and generosity; it seems nearly impossible! But Jesus wouldn't ask it of us if it were not possible, and what we celebrate on All Saints' Day is all the Christ followers who have done these very things!

How can we do the same? How can we ever move beyond our own selfishness? How can we overcome our quick impulse of resentment, our anger and pride, and the slowness of our sympathy? How can we ever put into practice the actual spirit and conduct which Jesus has put before us in these words to his disciples? Yet even the least of us have glimpses of what this means. And we have such glimpses in great part because of the people in our lives who have walked with us, who have taught us, who have shown us the way by following the example of Christ themselves. And meanwhile, we can trust that Jesus, who set the goal so high and far, will have compassion and understanding for the slow steps of each of us who, though our eyes are tuned to him, are still so distant from his ideal.

There is a children's book by Shel Silverstein entitled The Giving Tree. Silverstein wrote the book in answer to the question, "How do you understand Jesus?" It is the tale of the relationship between a young boy and a tree in the forest. "Once there was a tree...and she loved a little boy." And so begins this remarkable tale of a tree that always provides the boy with what he wants; branches on which to swing, shade in which to sit, and apples to eat. But as the boy grows older, so do his demands. He even asks the tree for more apples

that he might sell and for branches with which he can build a house. But the tree loves the boy very much and gives him anything he asks for. In the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, the tree lets the boy cut her down so that the boy can build a boat in which he can sail. Then the boy leaves the tree, now nothing more than a stump, and he sails off. Many years later, the boy, now an old man returns to the tree. The tree says to the man, "I have nothing left to give you."

The man replies, "I do not need much now, just a quiet place to sit and rest."

Then the tree says, "Well, an old tree stump is a good place for sitting and resting. Come boy, sit down and rest." The man did, and the tree was happy.

Christ calls us to be like that tree; to give and give and give of ourselves out of love for another. Christ tells us not to hold anything back, to be so extravagantly generous that we offer all of ourselves until there is nothing left to give. Today we celebrate the "giving trees" in our lives. Those people who have freely offered us their fruit because they loved us. Those people who have willingly shaded us in their warm embrace because of their compassion for the lost; those people who have readily given of their whole lives so that Christ's love might be made known in the lives of others.

Today, we remember and celebrate the saints who were happy to follow Christ in the most extravagant ways. I don't know about you, but I'd be lost without such people. I'd be stuck on the side of the road in rural Ohio, with a broken car sitting in the ditch next to me. I'd be standing in the middle of the forest with the sun beaming down on me, hungry and thirsty with no place to sit in the shade and rest. I wouldn't be standing here. And so today I lift thanks for Granny and Papaw, for Rennay, for Mom and Dad, for Olivia, for Rev. Mattye Kirby, for Rev. Carol Wilson, Richelle, MK, Dr. Lancaster, and Bishop Craig. For Bill and Lou Dalton. You have such a list as well. Today we give our thanks for all the saints who have followed Christ's unexpected and yet extravagant ways.

It is no easy thing to live this way, to seek out the best for others no matter what, to be generous even when that generosity is taken advantage of, to love even in the face of hate. But these are the qualities of saints. And they are the qualities of the disciples of Jesus Christ.

I think any celebration of All Saints' Day is empty without a recognition that we too are called to be saints. It's a shared privilege. This world full of selfishness and hate needs to know selfless generosity and true love, and we are to be the people that show it. As disciples of Christ, we should live in such a way that someday people will lift us up as saints; not because we want recognition, and not even because we have died, but because we have lived the way Christ calls us to live, full of generous love for all.