

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

November 7, 2010 - All Saint's Sunday

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 6:20-31

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. 'Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. 'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets. Love for Enemies

'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

--Hebrews 12.1,2

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

SERMON

In Robert Bellah's sociological study of American religion, Habits of the Heart, a woman by the name of Sheila told the author, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. **It's Sheilaism.** Just my own little voice." Sheila explained that she doesn't care what others believe, because she had constructed her own religion. It wasn't a far out belief system, but it was her own creation. It consisted of loving oneself, and being gentle with one self. "I think," she said, "He would want us to take care of each other."

We have a phenomenon in this country that is lumped together under the banner of "New Age" religion. It combines pieces of Christianity and eastern religions, plus individual additions. Often it is gentle and soothing. But as its name implies, it is new. It is created by the believer.

Churches that celebrate All Saints have a different understanding of church and faith. We, for example, are deliberately Lutheran Christians, people who are a part of the holy catholic, or universal church. Lutheran Christians don't sit around and think up our own set of beliefs. Instead, our faith is given to us, deposited with us, handed down from the

past. We say without shame, we are an historic church. In one sense our faith does not even belong to us. We belong to it.

We may change the music, or the language. We may say "you" instead of "thee." We may find modern words to replace ancient words no longer in use, but we don't change the essence of the faith. We do not participate in what we consider fads and fashions in beliefs. To belong to this church is to believe that the church, for the most part, got it right the first time. To belong to this church is to believe that our religion is given, revealed to us. It is also to believe that we are a part of a great company, a great family.

The writer of the book of Hebrews has a wonderful sense of belonging to something bigger than himself. "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses..."

Some people see themselves as isolated. But we come to this cathedral and find ourselves connected. We are in touch with both the present and the past. Surrounding us this day, note the stained glass, are the writers of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Filled with wonderful symbols, the windows remind us of our heritage.

In another sense we are surrounded by all of the Biblical figures. Today Abraham, Sarah, Ruth and her grandson David join us in singing our hymns. Mary, John, Lydia and Paul kneel with us at the communion table.

We are not just single individuals who stand alone before God. We are, for example, a part of a community not bound by time. We are connected with those who have died in the recent past. We are also a part of a global community of faith. Even the miracle of our belief is a result not only of those who set sail from Europe or Africa years ago, but because someone carried the story of God with them. Jesus loves me this I know, not just because the Bible tells me so, but because my mother tells me so...and she knows because of her father. Her father knows because his parents told him so.

If with Henry Ford you say, "history is bunk," then you are not impressed. If you are a person, as are many young adults and college age people, who is looking for a way to disconnect yourself from your home town and your family and your past, then you won't be impressed that we are an historic religion. But if you are seeking a way to belong to something bigger than this moment, bigger than this location, what I say may be a comfort.

A friend of mine once baptized a man who had no family. His parents had died when he was an infant. As far as he knew, he had no brothers, sisters or close relatives. As a child he lived in a series of foster homes and never identified any of them as family.

During his baptismal instruction he began to read Christian history with the passion of someone searching for long lost relatives. He saw these people as a part of his

religious family tree. Together my friend and the man remembered Augustine who lived 1,400 years ago. Augustine's mother Monika led him from his wild playboy world into the world of faith. They remembered the reformers, John Wesley, John Calvin, and Martin Luther. When he wanted to know about some of the crazy, far out members of the family he was told of Simeon Stylites, a god-intoxicated man who lived on a pole 70 feet above the ground for 36 years until his death at 65. Why was he on the pole? To learn discipline and prayer. They remembered Philip Neri, a gentle man who skipped around Rome in the late 1500s, playing practical jokes, dressed in wild costumes and singing songs with children and adults.

He loved the tales of Teresa of Avila, who lived in the early 1500s in Spain, a woman who combined a zeal for reform with a delightful sense of humor. She helped rid Spain of a flabby Christianity by forming a group called the Barefoot Carmelites. She wrote two books on prayer, The Interior Castle, and The Way of Perfection, that are considered classics. And she could laugh. She once told God, "If I had my way, that woman would not be the Mother Superior." She reported that God immediately replied, "If I had my way, she wouldn't either."

Once when Teresa attempted to cross a stream she slipped off her donkey and fell head long into the water. When she came up sputtering God said to her, "I discipline those I love." Teresa immediately replied, "No wonder you have so few friends when you treat the ones you have so badly."

Finally, my friend told of caregivers, Clara Barton, an angel of mercy to wounded soldiers during the civil war, and Fr. Damien, who ministered to lepers on an island in Hawaii until he himself died of the disease 20 years later.

If this man had been baptized here he would have been told about Bethel's history of faithful lay and ordained leaders. He would have heard stories about pastors with the names of Preus, Siljin, Wee, Schmidt, Swiggum and Borgwardt. As he heard these stories he would have been connected with the rest of the family of faith. Someday your children will tell stories of Hanson, Harrold, Sutherland, Suarez and Swanson.

From the creed we confess, to the hymns we sing and the scriptures we read, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

These are people who witness to the faith first articulated by Jesus. "I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...do to others as you would have them do to you."

St. Paul tells us that, "As far as it is possible, live in peace with all." This is not only great advice for how you exist in your neighborhood, and how you relate to your family, it may be the advice that can save our country. We are deeply divided. Part of the division is an honest disagreement as to how the country should move forward. Some believe that we need a strong push by the government, and others want the role government plays to be severely limited. Some believe that if we rely on the private sector greedy individuals

will skim most of the profits off the top and such things as health care will end up costing us far more than if we allow the government to hold a strong hand. Others believe that anything the government handles is mishandled. Though these positions appear to be miles apart, I believe that those two sides can still work together. If that alone is our division, we can live peaceably with all.

But there is something standing in our way. It is a group of strong willed, articulate individuals, on both the right and the left, whose very lives and livelihoods now depend on the perpetration of conflict as opposed to the resolution of problems. They live off the disagreements. If we all got along there would be no reason for them to be on the air, or to write or to blog. The actual livings of these people are dependent on continuing a fight as opposed to finding a solution. If there is peace, there is no need for them. If we all just get along, they go out of business. We need peacemakers. We need people who are willing to give up their own power to create reconciliation. We need people to do on the political scene what our Lord did.

In a moment you will be invited to kneel and receive the body and blood of Jesus. Like most of what we do, this is not something we made up to help you feel good, nor is it a fad that will soon go the way of the Nehru Jacket. Rather, it is an event now centuries old that reminds us that though sin has the power to divide us from all that is good, God has the power to make us whole. It is a meal that will bind us together. It will unite us.

All Saints is a day when we say to the Sheilas of the world, "You need not be alone in your own little religion, one that will pass away like a fad. You can be grasped by that which has been handed down through the ages. And when you pray, do not see yourself as a lone, solitary figure trying to reach God. Join us here, surrounded with a great host of witnesses, in this ancient building, with these ancient words and address the God who was faithful to Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to Uncle Pete and Aunt Gladys. You are a part of a wonderful family that stretches through time. You are a child of God, a saint of God." Amen. © 2010