

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Peter Strommen

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

November 6, 2011 All Saint's Sunday
Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Matthew 5.1-13

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

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

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

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

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

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

SERMON

Author Steven Covey wrote an exercise I’d like you to imagine. As I paraphrase it, you’ll begin to see its connection to All Saints Sunday and the Beatitudes of Jesus in today’s scripture reading.

In your mind’s eye, picture walking into a funeral home. You recognize many who are gathering there. At the other end of the chapel you see a casket, floral arrangements and poster boards with pictures. There by the guestbook is a bulletin of the funeral service. Four people are listed to make tributes. You know them all; a family member, a friend from your community, a co-worker and a friend from church. But ever since you arrived something seems odd. People don’t notice you. It’s as if you’re invisible. “Wait a second”, you think, “maybe they don’t see me at all. Could this be my funeral service?” you wonder. “Is that my body in the casket?” Now your eyes catch your name atop the service bulletin. As your thoughts and feelings swirl, you gaze again at the names of the four speakers. What will they say about you? What do you hope they’ll say?

Covey now asks his readers to write down what they would like the speakers to say about them at their funeral. His purpose in this exercise is to help us identify what we value most deeply. Covey urges us to “begin with the end in mind”, in other words, attend now to what is most important when life’s end is reached. That’s what made Steve Jobs’ Stanford graduation speech so impactful; he was so mindful of his eventual death.

Christians would say more. We might add: “When I meet Jesus, what do I pray will have come through my life? One way of understanding Jesus’ Beatitudes is to think of them as value statements for the kingdom of God. Jesus begins eight promises with the word “blessed”. In each one, he describes an attitude, a way of approaching life. Some of them may puzzle us at first. All of them make us think. Each ends with a promise.

They name the core values of God’s kingdom. They will define the public ministry of Jesus. And if there had been a funeral for Jesus, and four of his friends and family were asked to say something, these beatitudes would describe Him. He begins his Ministry with the end in mind. “Here is what will define my life and leadership as Messiah. This is what the kingdom I bring looks like”. For my message this All Saints Sunday, I will briefly describe each of these beatitudes, these core values of God’s kingdom. I hope you will see that only Jesus perfectly embodies them, but perhaps you will also notice how these values show up in his family. Never perfectly. In fact, if you took the character of Ebenezer Scrooge as an example, they would only show up in the last years of his life. But it’s no accident either, that followers of Jesus do reflect these values from time to time, bringing joy to heaven. “Blessed” begins each of the beatitudes. But we may not have the right word in English to convey Jesus’ meaning. “Blessed” is ok. “Happy” is sometimes used, but it is really not adequate. Jesus is not giving us commandments so much as describing what God honors. We could say “honored are they”. “Honored are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The word “poor” like “rich” can signify more than economics. Just as “rich” can mean “self-sufficient”, even “arrogant” or “filled”, so “poor in spirit” here signifies “humble” and “trusting”. The “poor in spirit” are promised the kingdom because they

know their need of it. "Honored are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". No one wants to mourn and mostly we try to avoid pain. But some things must be faced. "How easily things get broken" sings the priest in Leonard Bernstein's Mass. Honored are those with empathy for suffering, who grieve with God at our sin, when things get broken, sometimes tragically so. They pray "deliver us from evil" and mean it.

"Honored are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" No, not timid. Humble. Gentle. They make room for others in their plans and understand that just "looking out for # 1" doesn't build a community.

"Honored are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." If you've ever been truly hungry or thirsty, you know the motivation to find water and food. What if being right with God and one's neighbor was such a passion?

"Honored are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Mercy is about compassion, forgiveness and justice. We pray for it each Sunday in the Lord's Prayer.

"Honored are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Purity of heart means undivided love towards God. Committed and not confused in our devotion.

"Honored are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." To seek peace instead of war, reconciliation instead of division, unity rather than needless factions, common ground over polarization. "Any jackass can burn down a barn". Peacemaking takes effort, courage and ingenuity.

"Honored are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Sometimes people suffer not because they are wrong, but society is. The first people who objected to slavery in this country, the Quakers, were publicly beaten and put in stocks. When Bishop Oscar Romero spoke on behalf of the desperately poor in his country, El Salvador, he was assassinated while saying Mass. Many of the saints we now revere once suffered for that which we now honor in them.

When I was a kid, my interest in athletics came later than it did for many boys and so did my coordination. I didn't try out for Little League until I was 12, the oldest age for playing. So when I peddled my bike to that first game, my glove on the handle bar and wearing my maroon team shirt, I was nervous and high strung. I made a sharp turn to cross Lyndale Avenue and didn't notice the mud puddle. The tires slipped and I went crashing down, the muddy water doused my jeans, shirt, cap - - and deeply, my confidence. As I furiously peddled home, crying in rage, I swore a blue streak. I knew better. We did not use foul language at home and we most certainly did

not take the name of the Lord in vain so my mother was greeted by a distraught, humiliated, foul-talking sight. But mother remained calm: "here Peter, put these jeans on, I've wiped off your cap and you can put on this t-shirt. You'll get there in time." And so five minutes later I was again peddling toward the ball field, carefully avoiding that puddle, venturing into my first organized sports event with a modicum of dignity. Mom never uttered a word about the swearing. She rejoiced that I had caught the fly ball hit in my direction. Back then, to have family members watch my game was too much scrutiny to bear, so I always went alone. But I will never forget my mother's kindness.

Mom has severe dementia today, but I remember well her bright mind and devout faith that radiated kindness. She made a quick judgment that day - - that her son's foul language was not as important as his humiliation. I think she was right. And at that moment of childhood humiliation and shame, I experienced something of God's mercy through her. What we remember today are the many people in our lives, both living and dead, who are in Christ and who have reflected God's presence to our human community. We must make sure to honor them properly. Saints are not and never were perfect models of the beatitudes. Only Jesus is that. Saints are forgiven sinners who are grasped by God's grace. But as we bring them to mind - - some of whom have died even this past year - - it is alright to notice in them some family resemblances to Jesus - -like mercy, trying to make things right, willingness to consider others, a desire to know God, the courage to be just. That is something of what we mean when we repeat, with appreciation, the words in our creed: "the communion of Saints". Amen. © 2011