

All Saints Sunday (A)
November 5, 2023
Text: Matthew 5:1-12

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Finding our way from here to there can sometimes be a bit of a challenge. I remember when we first moved to Portland, 22 ½ years ago now, one of my constant companions was a big, thick road atlas. It had all the streets of the city laid out in grids. It was long before I got a smartphone with GPS. So any time I was getting ready to go somewhere new, I'd get out the road atlas to find my destination on the map, and then plan my route to get there. It usually involved noting major cross-streets or important features like a bend in the road, or a school or city park.

And finding our way through a new, unfamiliar city seems like a piece of cake compared to finding our way through life. I'm afraid that if we rely on the sort of "map" that our culture provides for us about how to live our lives, we'll miss out on what makes life rich and full of joy. Our culture tells us things like we should aggressively promote our own personal "brand," or that we should measure the significance of our lives by the amount of money we earn, or the type of car we drive, or the clothes we wear. Our culture directs our attention to certain outward signs for a successful life—signs such as how many social media followers we have, or how expensive our possessions are. And when we invest our whole selves in chasing those kinds of things, we'll end up spiritually impoverished, if not lost.

Fortunately, there is an alternative sort of map we can follow. In our Gospel reading, Jesus invites us to measure our lives in a very different way. What is of real and lasting value? What is worth giving our hearts to, worth striving for and sacrificing for? It turns out that happiness, or a sense of being blessed, that our lives are rich and full, comes from our connection to and commitment to loving our neighbors—because loving our neighbors is at the heart of our life with God.

So Jesus invites us to recognize genuine blessing, genuine happiness, in the lives of those who care about their neighbors, care about those relationships, enough to show mercy and forgiveness, to seek peace and reconciliation. They're not the ones who try to exploit differences between people for their own gain. They don't trash people who are different from them with a nasty social media blast. Instead, they seek the common concerns that bind us together. People like that—the merciful, the peacemakers—are truly blessed, whether our culture recognizes it or not. They are children of God.

Jesus encourages us to see real and lasting value, real joy, in the lives of those who care about their neighbors enough to be genuinely bothered by the things that harm those neighbors. They are especially concerned for those who face injustice and discrimination—because of race or religion, because they are gay or transgender, because they are a refugee. People like that, who grieve for the suffering of others, who hunger and thirst for all things to be made right, who want to lift the burdens that their neighbors struggle with—they are truly blessed, whether our culture is capable of seeing it or not. They will be comforted.

Jesus wants to open our eyes to see true riches and true meaning in the lives of those who care about their neighbors enough to set aside their own wants and desires, those who aren't concerned first and last with pushing their own way to the head of the line, but instead are humble, who know their need for God. They don't spend their effort trying to grab the gold ring. They're not the arrogant, self-promoting ones who treat others dismissively, who only want to make themselves great. Instead, they see their abilities and energy as gifts given by God to be used for others, for the common good. People like that, who are meek, who are poor in spirit—they are truly blessed, even if our culture would laugh at the thought. To them belongs the reign of God. They will inherit the earth.

Jesus calls us to realize that the only life worth living belongs to those who are so completely devoted to God's way of forgiveness and compassion and generosity that they don't care what anyone else thinks. They have a singleness of focus that Jesus calls being "pure in heart." And if their total commitment to living that way causes others to reject them or harass them, they shake it off. They reject the easy turn to retaliation or violence, whether verbal or physical. People like that, who are pure in heart, who are persecuted for righteousness' sake—they are truly blessed, even if our culture is incapable of understanding such blessing. They will see God.

This is the sort of counter-cultural life that Jesus invites us to follow, to measure our lives by. This sort of life is genuinely human, the life God created us for—a life of real and true blessing. This sort of life is visible in the lives of God's people. I have seen it in you. Historically, the word the church has used for that sort of person is—a saint. A saint is not a perfect person, not faultless or flawless. A saint is simply someone whose life is set apart for God's way of love, of forgiveness, of mercy, of justice and generosity. Being a saint does not exclude the possibility of making mistakes, or even colossal screw-ups. A saint is someone who knows in their bones that the only way of life worth giving your heart to is one focused on loving God and loving your neighbor.

Today, we give thanks for those saints who have gone before us, who have helped lead the way for us. It's not just the famous ones like St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa, but your grandmother who took you to church, or your 3rd grade Sunday School teacher. It's the friend who sat with you through that really terrible time, or the person who helped you experience and appreciate the power of forgiveness by forgiving you when you did that one thing. It's the neighbor who showed you how beautiful generosity is, or the youth group leader who encouraged you to really take hold of your identity as a child of God. And for each of us, the list can go on and on. All of those beautiful people, some of whom now rest in God's love, we give thanks for them and for the ways God has touched our lives through them. And we pray that God would use us to light the way for generations of faithful people yet to come. Thanks be to God. Amen.