

All Saints 2022 Luke 6:20-31

We are almost to the end of our liturgical calendar, which means that in just a couple of weeks, we will be shelving Luke's gospel from the Sunday lectionary for the better part of two years. That always makes me a little sad, because I know I'm supposed to appreciate all the gospels equally, but personally I prefer Luke's storytelling. There are subtle and not-so-subtle differences between the authors even in the stories that sound similar. Today's assigned passage is a good example. Matthew's beatitudes are the more popular and more often quoted version, probably because they're a little more ambiguous, softer, they give us a little more wiggle room in interpretation: *Blessed are the poor "in spirit" ...Blessed are those who hunger "for righteousness" ...*Matthew lets us think about these struggles as spiritual or intellectual trials. But Luke is much more concrete: *Blessed are you who are poor...Blessed are you who are hungry...*Luke points to the practical, everyday conditions of this life we are living.

The temptation is to read this passage on All Saints Day as a list comparing and contrasting temporary life now with eternal life after death. We name the saints who have gone before us into the heavenly kingdom and we think of all the imperfect conditions in which they lived, maybe not quite the same list as Luke's beatitudes—poverty, hunger, weeping, exclusion, defamation—but the struggles of this human existence nonetheless, and then we think of those saints, now in the never-failing light of God's love, redeemed from all of those problems and perfected in holiness. We do place our hope in the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises, but that duality of earthly struggle and heavenly reward, of sinner on earth and saint in heaven, wasn't what Luke was talking about, nor does it reflect our understanding, especially as Lutherans, of what it means to be a saint.

Jesus so rarely talks about heaven as the place people, especially "good" or "saintly" people, go when they die; but Jesus talks all the time about the kingdom of heaven as a way to live *now, in this life*, that makes God's good intentions for abundant life a reality within our human community. Any honest look at the world around us reveals deep brokenness: we are the victims of other people's sinfulness, and we participate personally and systemically in sinfulness that hurts others. But it's the lazy way out to say, "Oh well! This life is as good as it's ever going to get; God will straighten everything out in heaven!" instead of responding to God's call to holy living, now. In his list of blessings and woes, Jesus doesn't contrast this life with life after death; Jesus contrasts this life lived according to the rules of God's kingdom with this life lived according to the rules of our broken human kingdom.

This is why I prefer Luke's rendering to Matthew's—poor and not poor *in spirit*; hunger and not hunger *for righteousness*—even for those of us who are fortunate enough to have as much as we want to eat and who, though we may not be rich, can certainly not say that we're poor. We can tell ourselves all sorts of things—true and not so true—to try to justify ourselves in the lofty realms of spirituality. But it's our concrete, observable actions that reveal our hearts, or, we might say, our loyalty to one kingdom or another. It's pretty hard to tell just by looking at me whether or not I hunger for righteousness; but if you watch me share that last cookie, then you can see that by hungering a little bit for something I want, someone else is blessed. It's pretty hard to tell just by looking at me whether or not I am poor in spirit; but if you see me giving to this and other ministries instead of spending all that money on new shoes, then you can see that I made myself not poor, of course, but at least a little less rich, in order to bless someone else. The beatitudes, especially Luke's no frills beatitudes, don't contrast this life and the next; they contrast two sets of values which we choose to consult to live this life—the way that tells us to live for ourselves or the way that tells us to live for others.

That is how this gospel speaks good news on this All Saints Day. We don't think of those who have joined the church triumphant as people who were awful in this life but who have been made perfect in the next. Nor do we only use that term “saint” to refer to spiritual superstars—St. Francis or Mother Theresa. When we think of our saints, the people in our community, who recently or even decades ago lived among us as part of that great cloud of witnesses, we think of the practical ways in which they used their lives as a blessing to others: teaching our Sunday school classes, cooking our church dinners, sitting on our committees, chaperoning our youth groups, washing our stained glass windows, pouring our communion wine, teaching us to say grace of over meals and our prayers at bedtime—the many ways they helped to form our faith through their faithfulness to God's kingdom way of living. They weren't perfect at it: Luther reminds us that we're all both saint and sinner, simultaneously, all the time, and all throughout this life—not just one or the other, and not sinners now and saints in the great beyond. But as we give thanks for those whose saintly moments we remember best, we also hear Jesus' words to us now: *Do to others as you would have them do to you...* a ethic which asks us to take the faith we received from others, and to pass it on through our own simple, practical acts of compassion, charity, mercy, and love. Like those who have gone before us, we have been called, redeemed, inspired, and equipped for holy living; “All” Saints includes us, too, so let's not wait to be a blessing to others.