

November 3, 2013
Luke 6:17-26
The Cloud Of Witnesses
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Today, the Sunday closest to Halloween, the church has proclaimed to be All Saints Day. When I was a school girl back in a Catholic neighborhood in Boston, Halloween was celebrated after dark. In our safe neighborhood, we would go around to all the neighbors, getting our candy payoffs for not sticking pins in door bells, toilet papering bushes or soaping windows. After Trick or Treating we would all go to parties that alternated among the homes of the most patient parents. There was no need to get us home to bed at the regular time, because most of us went to parochial school. The day after Halloween is called All Saints Day, a Feast Day. Parochial Schools were closed and all we had to do was get to Mass in the morning. Life was good for us. We could maintain our sugar high while our friends whose benighted parents sent them to public school, had to go cold turkey.

I leave the saints for a moment and go to the Luke Beatitudes. Did you note that they are radically different from Matthew's passage. We are more familiar with the Matthew passage that lists 8 beatitudes that call blessings on the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, etc. Luke, on the other hand, speaks directly to the poor, the sick, the mourning assuring them that they are beloved of God.

Listen to the familiar Matthew passage:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

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

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Now listen again to Luke's words:

17 He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.

18 They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.

19 And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

21 "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

22 "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

Can you imagine the dialogue over a Starbucks between the two writers?

Luke: Matthew, great job on the Beatitudes but don't you think that Jesus had more compassion for the actual poor than your writing describes?

Matthew: Well, Luke, you are probably right. Jesus had a great love for the poor but he also challenged the wealthy to do more for the poor. Remember that story about Dives and Lazarus. The poor man went to heaven and the rich man went to the other place because he didn't have a generous bone in his body.

Luke: But Jesus got really angry at the Pharisees who tried to stop him curing cripples on the Sabbath.

Matthew: True but remember the story of the woman who came into the room where Jesus was dining. She poured costly oil on his head and feet. Everyone complained that she was wasting the expensive oil. It could be used to feed the poor. Jesus answered them saying, "The poor you will always have, but you won't always have me."

Luke: I always wondered about that passage. I guess we are describing two sides of the same message that Christ wants to teach us.

Throughout human history, the poor have been ignored, despised, taken advantage of, persecuted and killed. Luke's Beatitudes cry out on their behalf, saying to them that even if no one else sees their suffering, God does, and they will be cared for. Matthew's beatitudes confer blessings on those whose hearts are with the poor, who share their wealth with the suffering.

This, the Sunday closest to All Hallows Eve, is designated in the common lectionary as All Saints Day. Why should we have a day dedicated to 'saints?' Even the word, 'saint' makes us a bit uncomfortable, doesn't it? It brings back all the reasons why there was a Reformation and why we pride ourselves on our egalitarian sense of worthiness or unworthiness, as the case may be.

Through out the centuries, though, there have been individuals whose lives have been honored and their deeds recognized as sources of inspiration. There are few who do not recognize the name, Francis of Assisi. Rejecting his affluent lifestyle and his dedication to warfare, Francis became one with the poor. His charismatic plea for the forgotten poor and sick still resonates in the work that is being done today throughout the world and close by in the missions of organizations like COTS and Mercy Connections and JUMP and in our volunteers who bring meals to Dismas House, deliver Meals on Wheels and make sandwiches for Small Potatoes.

Through all times, individuals – those who see and feel and understand the call of Christ – have given their great measure of love acting out Matthew’s Beatitudes in care of those who are described in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes:

There are people in our history; people like Roger Williams who was exiled from Boston by the Puritans because he stood up for the rights of the native peoples and because he established Providence as an open and welcoming place for all those others rejected by the Boston Church. People like Harriet Tubman who put their lives on the line to rescue slaves and bring them to freedom. People like Martin Luther King, Jr. who gave their lives for full equality for all Americans and Archbishop Romero and four American church women who were assassinated in El Salvador by the military precisely because they spoke for the poor, the hungry, the persecuted in a time of vast divide between the wealthy few and the many poor.

As the verse from Hebrews states, ‘We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,’ caring and loving lives have touched and, perhaps, changed our lives. These are the saints whose names are not in headlines, who have not won Nobel Prizes or been canonized in the Vatican. They are us if we choose to take the Beatitudes seriously. To be a saint is simply to care enough about others that you seek what is best for them, even if it may cost you your time, your assistance or your willingness to be inconvenienced. In other words, to be a saint is to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not easy for any of us to see ourselves as saints any more than we see ourselves as sinners. And yet, when we go out of our way to do something good for another or even when we put a check in an envelope being sent to an organization doing work to increase the health and welfare of sisters and brothers in places of poverty, we make that action or that check writing a blessing, a holy act. In doing so, we say with Luke, Blessed are you who are poor. You are no longer invisible. By doing what I can for you, I am fulfilling God’s assurance that you will be cared for. We are saying with Matthew that we act with compassion but not with pity. We are family, caring for one another. We seek the best for one another because we are family and because what we want for ourselves, we also want for the whole family.

