

“The Merciful” based on 1 John 3:1-3 and Matthew 5:1-12

There is a timelessness to All Saints Sunday, similar to the spacelessness to World Communion Sunday. On World Communion Sunday, as the Table of Christ feeds people around the whole world, we are able to connect to our siblings in faith without distance separating us. On All Saints day we connect to those who went on before us, blessed us, and entered the great cloud of witnesses. I often think of the great cloud of witnesses as being not just around us, but under us – they are the ones on whose shoulders we stand.

Some of the saints we knew well, some of their names will be read today, some of them predated us by too many years for us to know them by name, and yet they form the great cloud of witnesses. This reminds us, as well, that we are here only for a brief period of time in the work of the church. Someday, we too, will be part of the cloud. The generations march ever onward. The cloud will someday include us, and those who aren't even here yet! The generations march ever onward.

Today is a day of timelessness.

It is also a day of timelessness in that grief slows down time, and time can feel relentless. On All Saints Day we don't JUST remember those who went on before us, and take a moment to acknowledge them, we also notice the heartbreak of grief and attend to each other in our heartbreak. While it is wonderful to have a great cloud of witnesses around us, most of us would rather have those we love right here with us! We are thankful to God for their lives, but usually we really wish we were able to share more time with them!

There is a deep holiness to the All Saints celebration, deep enough that there is mystery in it as well. In seeking to be faithful to the lives of the Saints, the lectionary has given us rather mysterious text as well. It seems simple, until you

try to make sense of it! Here are the useful bits I've learned about these so called Beatitudes:

1. The verbs really matter.
2. A bunch of the individual “blessings” are quotes from the Hebrew Bible.
3. A lot of explanations exist to solve seeming contradictions

I'm gonna explain each. First of all, the verbs. Those who speak Greek say that a whole lot of effort is made into having the verbs be in the form they're in. Namely, that the statements say blessed ARE, but then indicate a future reality (mostly). Furthermore, they aren't commandments, they are stated as facts. Finally, according to *Feasting on the Word*, “In Psalm 1 the Hebrew word translated in our English text by our word 'blessing' is the word '*ashar*', which means in its literal sense 'to find the right road'. ... This is the meaning of '*ashar*' in the nine uses of 'blessed'” in the Beatitudes.”¹ That means that these mean something like “You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit.”² Or, perhaps, “You who are merciful are on the right road, you will receive mercy.” So each line says “this group of people is on the right road – and this is where it will lead them in the future.” These aren't particularly normal verb constructions, which is why they're worth mentioning.

Now, the Jesus Seminar thinks there is evidence to suggest that Jesus likely said 4 of these blessings – because they show up in Luke and Thomas. Those are: the poor in Spirit, those who grieve, those who hunger and thirst (for righteousness), and those who are persecuted. They think Matthew filled in the rest as a way to uphold the early Christian Community.³ In both cases, the blessings have striking Hebrew Bible roots.

First off, this text seems to be a reworking of Psalm 1, that being a Psalm that talks about blessed people rather extensively (in the “to find the right road”

meaning). Regarding comfort to mourners, which the Jesus Seminar thinks goes back to Jesus, that sounds a whole lot like Isaiah 61:1-3, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; **to comfort all who mourn**; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

Regarding meek inheriting, which the Jesus Seminar thinks Matthew created, we hear it in Psalm 37:11, “But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight in abundant prosperity.”

As a whole, the lists of qualities of people sound like lists in the Hebrew Bible that relate to who can enter the temple! There are moral standards being held here, and they reflect the tradition they grow from. For example,

Psalm 15:1-5

1 O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your holy hill?

2 Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart;

3 who do not slander with their tongue,
and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbours;

4 in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
but who honour those who fear the Lord;

who stand by their oath even to their hurt;

5 who do not lend money at interest,
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Psalms 24:3-6 does the same. So, Jesus is REWORKING, or REMOLDING his own tradition, and then Matthew is doing the same. Given those realities, the really interesting pieces may be in what finally gets included and excluded? Why were the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness the groups of people who fit? Is it because things were hard for peasants and things were hard for early Christians? Or is there something deeper? (I don't know, I'm just wondering.)

Finally, people have done a lot of work to try to understand this passage, as it is one of the best known parts of the Bible while being rather obscure. The New Interpreter's Bible has points out, "Peacemakers does not connote a passive attitude, but positive actions for reconciliation."⁴ (180, NIB) Marcus Borg explains some of the others:

"'Poor in spirit' almost certainly does not refer to well-to-do people who are nevertheless spiritually poor, but to people whose material poverty has broken their spirit. Moreover, 'righteousness' in the Bible and Matthew does not mean personal rectitude, as it most often does in modern English, but justice. 'Those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*' likely means 'those who hunger and thirst *for justice*.' The meaning of Mathew's wording is thus similar and perhaps identical to what we find in Luke, for it is the poor and hungry who yearn for justice. In short, like the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes confirm that the kingdom of God is both religious and political: it is *God's* kingdom, and it is a *kingdom on earth* that involves a transformation of life for the poor and hungry."⁵

Perhaps that's why these groups were included! Taken together, the work of scholars establishes that these are meaningful phrases that fit into the rest of Jesus' teaching, and that they aren't meant to just be a mystery!

So, these really are powerful teachings. As one scholar puts it, "In none of the beatitudes is advice being offered for getting along in this world, where mercy is

more likely to be regarded as a sign of weakness than to be rewarded in kind.”⁶ “Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance one’s career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God’s future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty.”⁷ The Beatitudes continue in the tradition of differentiating the ways of God – justice, righteousness, peace, well-being for all – with the ways of the world. The values the Beatitudes celebrate are not at all the ones the world seeks, but they are the ones that build the kingdom.

On All Saints we remember those who went on before us, and we remember the ways that their lives followed God's ways. On All Saints we remember that they have shown us the right road, and that in doing so they made it easier for us to travel it. We also remember that the roads that we choose matter: they matter for the kingdom itself, and they matter for those who will come after us.

It is a good road, this one that Jesus describes, it is a very different road than others we could also choose to walk. It is a good thing we have models who have walked the road ahead of us – and continue to walk it with us as the great cloud of witnesses. Amen

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¹Earl F. Palmer “Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 5:1-12” in *Feasting on the World Year A Volume 4*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2011) 238.

²Palmer, 238.

³Robert W. Funk, Roy W Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (HarperOneUSA, 1993), page 138.

⁴M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible Volume VII: Matthew* Leander E. Keck editorial board convener (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), page 180.

⁵Marcus Borg, *Jesus: The Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperOne: 2015), 190-191.

⁶Boring, 179.

⁷Boring, 181.

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Pronouns: she/her/hers

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