

## All Saints' Day 2017 Sermon

### *Matthew 5:1-12*

*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."*

I would like to share with you today a reflection on today's Gospel by David Lose:\*

There is a scene in the movie *Schindler's List* that came back to me while reading [today's Gospel passage – which is that list of sayings of Jesus known as] the Beatitudes. [In the movie,] Amon Goeth [pronounced “ahmahn gate”], played by Ralph Fiennes, is the commandant of a German death camp. Goeth is, in brief, a violent sociopath, prone to kill the Jewish prisoners at his camp indiscriminately. And he believes that his ability to kill is the very essence of power. Oskar Schindler, played by Liam Neeson, is a consummate showman and has somehow worked his way into Amon Goeth's good graces. One evening, Schindler challenges Goeth's beliefs about power. The ability to **kill** isn't power [argues Schindler]; the ability to have **mercy** is power. That's why, Schindler argues, the [Roman] Emperor was the most powerful person in Rome. Anyone could *kill*; [but] only the Emperor could **pardon** a convicted criminal, out of mercy. Goeth “tries on” being merciful, pardoning a few people who have annoyed him. It feels good, but he can't pull it off for long, eventually returning to his brutal ways. Exercising mercy, it turns out, is harder than it looks, and it proves to be a power that eludes him as he is drawn back to the ordinary, cultural exercise of *violence* as power.

I thought of this scene in relation to [today's Gospel passage,] the Beatitudes, because I believe the common mistake we make – or at least that **I** have regularly made – when reading the Beatitudes is to see them as a kind of moral check list. Sermons following this interpretative line will typically urge their hearers to live a “beatitudes-kind-of-life”... Quite frankly, it's hard not to be a little sympathetic [toward this way of interpreting the passage, for] ... the Beatitudes do indeed lift up particular behaviors – hungering and thirsting for righteousness, being merciful – that are admirable and lend themselves to exhortation. But while I can imagine imploring folks toward *some* of these ideals, ... it makes *less* sense to urge **other** beatitudes as actions – “Go be meek!” – and somewhat *ridiculous* when it comes to still others – “Be mournful!”

So, rather than merely urging a distinct ethic [or way of behaving in this world], Jesus is, I think, [doing something very different: he is] inviting us to imagine what it's like to live in the kingdom of God, and by inviting that imagination, [he is] drawing a sharp contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, ...challenging our often unconscious allegiance to the [world]. Notice first that the people whom Jesus is calling "blessed" are definitely *not* the people the larger **culture** viewed as blessed. [The blessed are] those who are mourning rather than happy? Those who are meek rather than strong? Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness rather than wealth? And that holds true for pretty much everything on Jesus' list. [Those whom Jesus sees as blessed are not blessed people in the eyes of the culture.]

So perhaps Jesus is playing for larger stakes than an improved ethic. Perhaps he's challenging who we imagine being blessed in the first place. Who is worthy of God's attention. Who deserves **our** attention, respect, and honor. And by doing that, he's also challenging our very understanding of blessedness itself and, by extension, challenging our culture's view of, well, pretty much everything. Blessing. Power. Success. The good life. Righteousness. What is noble and admirable. What is worth striving for and sacrificing for. You name it. Jesus seems to invite us to call into question our culturally-born and very much this-worldly view of **all** the categories with which we structure our life, navigate our decisions, and judge those around us.

And this includes our view of those we have loved and lost in the previous year. Indeed, my very word choice seems suddenly inadequate in light of the kingdom Jesus proclaims. We have not "lost" those who have died. Rather they live now in the nearer presence of God, beyond our [sight or] immediate reach, yet connected to us through memory [and the very **real** energies of] faith, [spirit,] and love. Part of what we do when we celebrate All Saints' Sunday... is to participate in the inversion of the kingdom of the world which believes that all we can see, hold, control, or buy is all there is. When we commend those we have loved to God's care, we proclaim that God's kingdom is not some distant thing or place but rather exists *now*, exerts its influence on us *now*, transforms our reality *now*. All Saints' Sunday, along with all Christian funerals, is a repetition and rehearsal of the Easter promise that there is something *more*, something that transcends our immediate experience, and this proclamation is rooted in the confidence that God's love and life are **more** powerful and enduring than the hate, disappointment, and death that seem at times to surround us.

Which is why I thought of the scene from *Schindler's List*. The **other**-worldly possibility of imagining that exercising mercy is **more** powerful than wielding violence is, in Jesus, suddenly a very **this**-worldly possibility. [And the other-worldly possibility that those whom we have loved and lost are **not** lost but are actually *present*, here, among us, is also suddenly a very **this**-world possibility. As we will soon reaffirm in the Apostles' Creed, "I *believe* in... the communion of saints... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." It's more than just words that we say; it's both real and transformative. I *believe* in a reality which I cannot see, hear, or touch with my physical senses, a **spiritual** reality and presence which is nonetheless *equally* as real – if not more so! – than the reality I **can** see, hear, or touch with my physical senses. "I *believe* in... the communion of saints... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

[So I would suggest that the Beatitudes are not so much **prescriptive** as they are **descriptive**: descriptive of the way things look and work in the Kingdom of God, where God blesses those we

wouldn't imagine *could* be blessed, where power is found in showing mercy, and where those whom we *thought* we lost are found, right here with us, in that very real community of spirit we call the communion of saints.]

“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.”

AMEN

\* <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/all-saints-a-preaching-a-beatitudes-inversion/>