

All Saints Sunday  
November 2, 2008  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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Revelation 7:9-17    Psalm 34:1-10, 22    I John 3:1-3    Matthew 5:1-12

The Great Cloud of Witnesses

All Saints Sunday. This is the day in the church year when we pause to remember the lives and witness of those people of faith who have gone before us.

What do you think of when you hear the word “saint”? What attributes must a person possess in order for you to think of them as a saint?

The sorts of people who come to mind for me are people like Mother Theresa. People whose very lives epitomize all the best things that we can hope to be in this life. Their self-giving to the point of sacrifice. Their unconditional love for others. Their peace-making ways for the betterment of all mankind.

At first blush, people like Mother Theresa might seem to be prime examples of those attributes which our Gospel lesson lists today. They were people who exemplified mercy, purity of heart, meekness and peace-making. Surely, we think, they will be blessed because of their righteous lives.

And yet, if you read the biography of Mother Theresa, you will see that there were many times that she was anything BUT meek. There were times when she

pushed forcefully for what she believed to be the right thing to do, flying in the face of custom and sometimes even the law.

If we delve more deeply into the meaning of Jesus' Beatitudes, what we find is that Jesus very intentionally uses language to convey a deeper meaning. He doesn't say, "You will be blessed if you are meek, merciful, pure in heart, etc." What Jesus is saying to those gathered to hear his Sermon on the Mount, and those of us gathered here today is in the *present* tense. "Blessed ARE the meek, merciful, pure in heart, etc." And then he moves to the future tense – "for they WILL inherit the earth, receive mercy, see God, etc."

These are words of hope and promise for us gathered here today. Jesus is making a declaration of *present reality* to us. We **are** blessed, and because of this, this is what we can expect to have happen in the future. The Beatitudes are not a set of ethical guidelines that we are supposed to follow in order to receive God's blessings; they are a list of promises to the faithful.

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Let me explain how I can say this – that Jesus is simply declaring to us what is already a present reality.

**First**, Jesus is using a form of discourse well known to his hearers. The Beatitude form goes way back to early Jewish times, and is even found in Egyptian

and pagan literature. This Beatitude form has distinctive function and meaning. It is both wisdom and prophetic. It's wisdom tradition because of the way it ascribes blessings to those in unfortunate circumstances; it's prophetic because it declares future reward and happiness.

**Second**, we need to understand the power of the spoken word. From the earliest Biblical times, and even before the written words, the spoken word was believed to have special power. God's word has the power to *create* what is said.

For instance, this is why the name of God is never given in the Old Testament, and why Jews – and many Christians – to this day will not say what we think is the name of God. It is because speaking the name of God holds power. The name of God itself is powerful. It's too powerful for people.

Remember when Jacob wrestled with God? And Jacob asked the name of the person with whom we was wrestling? He refused to give it, in the belief that knowing a person's name granted power over that person. Words are powerful.

We hear this same thought from Martin Luther, when he said that faith comes through the spoken word. It is through hearing the Gospel preached that faith is created in the hearts of believers.

This might be a hard concept for those of us living in this increasingly visual and aural age to grasp. We receive so much input from so many different sources

that perhaps we should stop to consider the power of the spoken word. There's a power both to build up and to break down. The truth of this is especially evident when one stops to consider the relationship between a parent and a child. How easy it is to build up a child's confidence through words of praise and encouragement, and how easy it is to tear it down with a few thoughtless words. So even today, we hear the power of the spoken word.

*Third*, in the Old Testament, holiness happened by being in contact with something or someone that was holy. In a number of places in the Old Testament, where the people believed God touched the earth, that became holy ground. For example, remember Jacob's dream, where the ladder came down from heaven to earth? Jacob changed the name of that particular place to Bet' El, or Bethel, which means "House of God," because that place had become holy. Or, remember when Moses was in front of the burning bush? Moses was told to take his shoes off because it was Holy Ground. God was there, and that place became holy.<sup>1</sup>

Becoming and remaining a saint comes from being in contact with God and God's people. Holy Communion – meaning, both the fellowship of holy people and the sacrament – and the Holy Bible keep us connected to the Holy One, which maintains us as the Holy People of God, God's saints.<sup>2</sup>

And so, in speaking his Beatitudes to the gathered crowd, Jesus was making prophetic declarations about the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God. He was speaking to the insiders of the kingdom, those saints who knew that the kingdom of God is at hand in Jesus, but who also wait for the eventual fulfillment of the kingdom at the end of the age. He was creating present reality through the spoken word. He was declaring to them – and to us – the objective reality of the Beatitudes. We saints *are* blessed in all those ways, and we *will* experience all those things he describes, because we are the saints of the kingdom of God.

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It's at this point where I can predict that at least a few of you are saying to yourselves, "Okay, Pastor, that *sounds* real nice. But I can tell you from my experience that there are many days I'm feeling none too meek, none too merciful, none too pure of heart." And quite frankly, after the week I've had, I'd have to agree with you. This has been Murphy's Law week: It seems like everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. Somebody cutting me off in traffic? I'm not feeling particularly pure of heart in that moment. Someone wanting to debate politics? Yeah, I'm not especially meek then. The printer that suddenly goes on the fritz and won't print a clean copy of our bulletins for today's services? Yeah, I'm not feeling

merciful AT ALL – it’s a small miracle at this point that the church’s printer isn’t at the bottom of Budd Lake right now.

It’s weeks like this that I can be glad that the Beatitudes are not an ethical prescription for righteousness, because if they were I would be failing miserably. But this is the good news for us: The Beatitudes are expressions of *what is already true* about the Christian community. They are not addressed to us as individuals, but to the whole faith community. Among every authentic Christian congregation can be found persons of meekness, ministers of mercy, and workers for peace. Their presence and activity among us is a sign of God’s blessing and a call to all of us to conform our common life more and more to these kingdom values.<sup>3</sup> We saints need the church – as imperfect as it is – for us to be saints – for us to be in contact with each other and the loving, forgiving, reconciling, and holy God.<sup>4</sup>

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On this All Saints Day, I am reminded of those people who were explars of the faith in my life. I’m thinking of a 98-year-old lady I met in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In a very brief time, Lonnie Leaman went from being self-sufficient to bed-ridden, and finally died. I consider myself blessed to have known Lonnie. Lonnie was a pillar of her church community all throughout her life. She was a hard worker, having served on the boards of a number of organizations. Hers was wise

leadership, knowing exactly when, how, and on what few occasions to wield the significant power she possessed. And she always did it in the best interests of the community.

I was with Lonnie the day before she died. As we sat and spoke together she became increasingly distant. She began staring off into a corner of her room, as if she was seeing something that I did not. Finally, I asked her what she was looking at. Lonnie said, “Don’t you hear it?” I said no, what do you hear? She said, “Singing. The most beautiful music I’ve ever heard.” A tear rolled down her cheek. She smiled.

Lonnie said she used to really enjoy singing with the church choir. But since she’d gotten older, she’d lost much of her voice. Lonnie told me she couldn’t wait to join that heavenly choir. She knew she’d get her voice back and would be singing praises throughout eternity. And I am convinced that, on that day, the heavenly choir was singing for Lonnie, letting her know that they were waiting with open arms for her to come join them.

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I’m sure many of you are now thinking about people who touched your lives, people who are examples of faith to you, people who made your life better just by their being with you. These are the great cloud of witnesses that we celebrate today.

These are the saints whose lives were touched by God, and who turned around and touched our own lives. These are the people who loved us enough to speak their words of faith, so that the Holy Spirit could create faith in each of us.

This day we celebrate their lives among us, giving thanks to God for creating the gift of faith in them, so that they could, in turn, pass on the gift of faith. Thank God for this great cloud of witnesses, those saints who went before us and who journey with us now. They, and we, are blessed.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Stoffregen, Exegetic notes on All Saints Day: Matthew 5:1-12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *New Interpreters' Bible Vol. VIII* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 180-1.

<sup>4</sup> Stoffregen