

All Saints' Day, Nov. 5, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA.
Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 34:1-10,22. I John 3:1-3, Matthew 5:1-12.

Matt. 5:1-12

1When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then 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.

11"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Raise your hand if you want to be poor in spirit, or hungry, or meek? Or in mourning? Or persecuted? Muslims persecute Christians; Buddhists persecute Muslims; Christians have persecuted Jews. Tribal societies persecute one another's tribe. Many of our brothers and sisters of faith suffer greatly. But, we don't want to be persecuted, hungry, helpless! And yet, Jesus calls people in that situation: blessed!

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Remember for a moment what we looked like when most of us were first brought into the church. Most of us were tiny, maybe crying, maybe asleep, maybe looking around and probably held in someone's arms. A few of us were grown; we knelt or bowed way down over the font from which a baptizer poured or splashed simple water on our heads in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Being helpless then was alright. God was busy working the miracle of grace. It will be similar when we die. We will be helpless and God will work the miracle of birthing us into eternal life.

But what about all those days and years in between? In school we are given recognition if we have good grades or are good athletes or are particularly cute or

have witty things to say. If we applied or apply ourselves in our jobs, most of us could or can earn a living. If we are kind and nice to people and remember their birthdays, most of us can have friends. We live in an IF / THEN world. IF you do this, THEN you will be rewarded. IF you do THAT, THEN you will be punished. Usually, but not always.

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I remember my grandchildren playing with water...they would fill a little pot and then keep pouring water into it until it overflowed. Then they would empty the container and do it again and again, watching and giggling when it overflowed. It was how they learned that when there's no room, there's no room. Not everyone learns that lesson. For some today, it's just MORE, MORE, MORE even if the glass is full. And if you're "full of yourself or full of striving for MORE," there's often little room for God and others.

God astonishes us because God doesn't work like the world works. God is there for us when we are empty of accomplishment, when we are on our knees in brokenness or sadness, when we give up trying to amass ever more stuff or money, when we give up trying to please everyone, when we realize we are powerless over whatever demons seek to destroy us. The demons of pride, or greed, or lust, or materialism, or a desire to succeed that overtakes everything else in our lives. Or when we turn even good things like education, money, sports, exercise, or food into gods in our lives. If the Holy Spirit blesses us with a wake-up call when our life isn't working, we realize we are estranged from the ways of Jesus.

If you've ever remodeled a house, or even a room, you know how much easier it is to remove everything first – rather than to work around furniture, clutter, or stained wallboard.

When we are empty, thirsty, and hungry, God's grace floods us with living water, feeds us with the bread of life, and heals us with Jesus' warm touch of forgiveness and acceptance. Then the rebuilding starts.

THEN we begin to understand Jesus' radical counterculture words of today's Gospel. BLESSED are the poor in spirit, the merciful, the meek, the pure in heart. These are not IF / THEN words. Jesus doesn't say IF you hunger and thirst after righteousness, THEN you will be filled. He doesn't require you to mourn or be persecuted. These are not methods or paths into the kingdom of God. These words describe how people of the kingdom live! We might prefer it if Jesus had said, "You will be blessed if you have the right theology". Or "You will be blessed if you have faith." Or "You will be blessed if you study hard and learn the

Bible by heart.” Now I have nothing against sound theology, faith and Bible study, but that’s not what Jesus said.

Jesus’ words are exactly opposite of what the world teaches us. Turn over the water cup, empty it, and stop refilling it to overflowing.

God looks at this counterculture son of his, the suffering servant, the Messiah anointed to reign from the cross of torture, the one person who obeyed his Father completely and loved humanity fully. And God says, I connect you people with this Jesus. In Baptism. In Holy Communion. In the meekness, and mourning, hunger and emptiness of your lives. And also -- when you are achieving and succeeding and enjoying life – in other words: ALL the time. When you are missing the mark and when you are doing good things, you’re mine, you live in grace, now let’s see how things will work in your life. It’s time to take that empty, gutted house and rebuild it.

Today’s Gospel is pure encouragement.

Sometimes you will be poor in spirit, discouraged, depressed, sad. Remember: all of heaven belongs to you. Sometimes you will mourn; some of us do today, for the names in our bulletin or for those in whose memory we lit a candle or for others we miss. At some point in this process, maybe even from Day One, you do perceive bits of comfort, and gradually you are comforted as God strengthens you to go about the tasks of your life.

Some of you are meek, gentle and kind. Do not fear that you will be overlooked; the whole earth is yours. Some of you hunger and thirst after righteousness: some of you desire equality and freedom and justice and truth so much you can taste that desire, but you never see your hopes fulfilled. Bless you for continuing to hunger and thirst for goodness and rightness in this world. Let your hunger drive you to work for God’s reign even now in this troubled world and take comfort when you are filled with the love and grace of Christ.

Some of you are merciful – and you recognize mercy when you see it.

Those of you who are pure in heart, for whom there is no compromise, for whom every immorality is painful, you see God in every moment of your day.

You who make peace, you are God’s children; you soothe the rest of us.

And you who are prophetic, you who stir up trouble for the sake of the kingdom of God, you who are outspoken for what you believe is right – you can line up with the rest of God’s outspoken prophets, right in line for the persecution they received. Keep your eyes on the prize of knowing how it all turns out in the end when God is fully in charge of heaven and earth.

When God is fully in charge, there will be no more weeping. Your blood-stained robes will be washed white again like the wedding garments of Jesus’ goodness. Since we know the ending, the journey doesn’t seem so hard. When children know there is a great feast at Grandmother’s house and they will get to play with their cousins, the car ride there isn’t so long. The same God who has the ending planned, sees us through today’s leg of the journey.

Blessedness may begin with emptiness, but it does not stop there. It continues when you share God’s grace with others in the world.

You work hard here at Dungeness Valley: for the food bank, for the many good and righteous causes to which you donate bazaar and garage sale money; you work for the good of the congregation, for the people in the community who need food and shelter, and for one another.

You act like the saints did who are listed on our memorial wall and listed in your hearts. You are saints of the church today. You know why you do these things, for whom you do them. It is never for your own glory, always to the glory of God.

When we remember the saints – in heaven and on earth – we receive encouragement from the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. We rejoice in people whose emptiness has been filled with the grace of God. Those living now are our companions on the journey. Those living beyond this life cheer us on when we become weary of living the counterculture life to which our Lord calls us.

We begin our pilgrim journey of faith empty and helpless. And we enter the church in heaven helpless at the time of our death. But in between we are not empty, for the grace of God fills us up. And God’s grace does not stop pouring when we think our glass is full. We become completely drenched by God’s grace and overflowing with the living water Jesus offers . . . today and always! Amen.