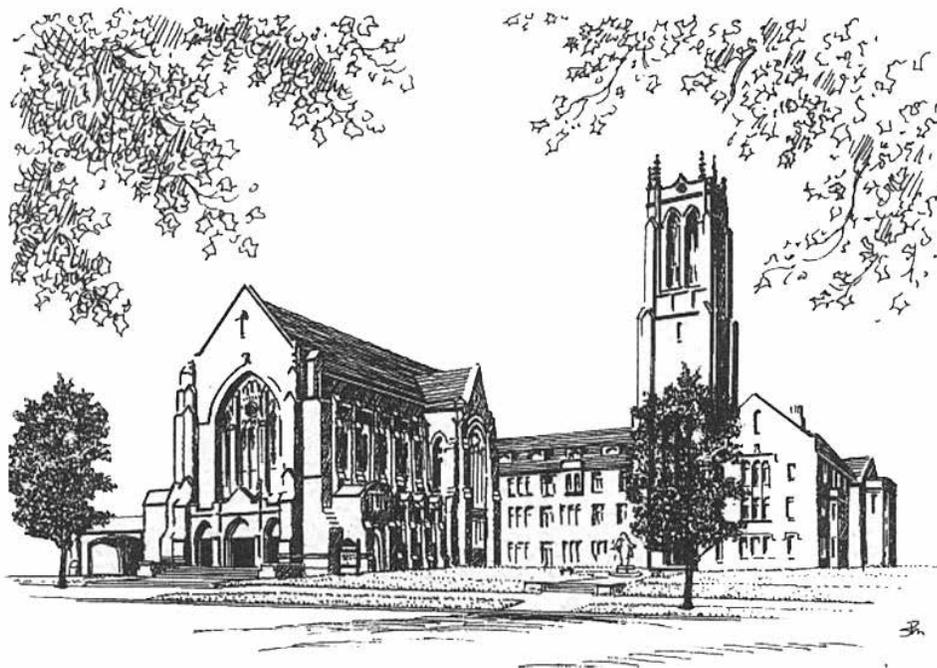


BLESSEDNESS REVISITED
by
Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

November 3, 2013

All Saints Sunday

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

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Texts: Daniel 7:1-3, 15-18; Psalm 149 or Psalm 150; Ephesians 1:11-23; and Luke 6:20-31

Ephesians 1:11-23

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Luke 6:20-31

²⁰Then 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. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.*

²⁴*“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

²⁵*“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.*

“Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶*“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

²⁷*“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

They were all in the crowd that day – rich and poor, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, the hated, the beloved, excluded, included, enemies and friends, children of God all.

And the truth of course, they are in our crowd too and every crowd. In just about every hearing of this sermon we call the beatitudes, in just about every gathering that hears it, this, Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, these same categories of people, all children of God, are gathered.

I suspect that in this list of names before us and many more are these persons too. You and I are thinking of today on this All Saints Sunday, all those who we have loved and lost. All the wonderful and complicated relationships we have shared with those gone past. And today we remember them all and trust them with the One true merciful God.

And we call them saints yes. Not because they were perfect but because they are loved by God and us and because they bore the claim of God in baptism.

To the crowd long ago and to ours Jesus says, “Blessed are you who mourn and weep now, for you will be comforted and rejoice.”

Jesus does cause us here to revisit what it means to be blessed.

Just like those in the first century world, we see outward prosperity as a sign of divine favor. Thus we tend to believe, expressed or not, that it might be true in our day, too. Our admiration and curiosity of those who seem to have it all together on the outside, or at least have what they want, make us wonder whether they have in some way been shown favor.

We call them or ourselves “blessed” when favor such as this comes.

And so our list of the blessed looks different than Jesus’s list. Without saying so, perhaps we act as though the beautiful and well dressed are automatically blessed, or that famous athletes, entertainment stars, wealthy magnates, or perhaps even those deeply spiritual people we read about or witness whose lives seems to be far removed from our own and therefore unattainable in that sense.

It is very hard for us to imagine the sorts of people Jesus lists in Luke’s Gospel, as saints and heroes.

Instead of our Gospel reading today we rather practically believe:

Blessed are the composed

Blessed are those who keep it together

Blessed are those who stay happy every day

Blessed are those who seek revenge for they will get ahead in life

Blessed are those who are the biggest and the strongest

Blessed are the worry and stress free

Blessed are the better off

No, Jesus takes a turn. An ironic, a paradoxical turn, unexpected turn. It sounds strange to us and, it sounded strange to the first hearers, too.

Yes, blessed are my aunt and uncle, and my family, who lost a 21-year-old young man, son, cousin, nephew, and brother to cancer this year.

Yes, blessed are you who are addicted to something evil that causes you to suffer or be persecuted and you yearn for healing. You will be comforted

Yes, blessed are you when you weep over a wayward child, or over a marriage that isn't what you had hoped. But blessed are you — you will one day be filled!

Yes, blessed are they who when they mourn over that past mistake that lingers over life, that won't let go...blessed are they who mourn that mistake. Yes, they will be comforted.

Yes, blessed are you when you weep over the wrongs of others and over a broken world.

Yes, blessed are you when you weep over the decline of civility in our culture and our politics. Yes, blessed are you who weep over things that deserve some tears shed on their behalf — blessed are you — for you will laugh!

Blessed are you when you are hungry, for you will be filled.

Blessed are our sister and brother Christians in the Middle East and others when they are persecuted because of bearing the name of Jesus; you will receive a reward one day.

Somehow by moving to the side of those who mourn and those who are poor and persecuted, we experience blessing too.

New Testament scholar and Professor Alyce McKenzie says that These blessings are meant to shape us as a community of faith, shake us up a bit and reorient us to where God's blessing truly resides and finally to lead us to the side of those who are blessed. Jesus does this here in ways that call conventional wisdom into question, challenge the way things are and intend eventually to change it. The goal is for the kingdom of God to be experienced here in this community.

The goal is that for these blessings to be re-defined and lived out in our midst. The church of Jesus Christ is the one who works with Christ today to fulfill the blessing.

Ephesians reminds the church, the people of God, to know the hope to which we have been called. For it is through the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we have been given the firm theological ground to stand on to make the claim that life is more powerful than death, peace more powerful than violence. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is the same one that causes us to say with faith that suffering and pain, and even death, is not the final say, no matter what happens.

God does not leave us in that place but raises us to a new and everlasting hope wherein those who have suffered can indeed be called blessed one day.

And these persons we name today and those who gather here, saints, sinners, heroines, and heroes, are inheritors of a great promise of hope that gives us cause to want to live for a greater glory. Ultimately then I believe in the words of our scripture today that maybe in this life, but certainly the next, crying will be no more, mourning will be gone, the hungry ache of the belly, the violence of this world, the abuse and neglect and hardships of today will be gone, and the reward will be peace and presence in the company of a loving and merciful God!

Jesus essentially says, Blessed are you, all of you, no exceptions, especially when you are grieved and downtrodden, because, remember, **great is your reward in heaven.**

The community of faith is to be a place where mourning and laughing can come and live together and mutual consolation can be shared and the people can together anticipate a day with God when pain will be over.

It was the first funeral I ever officiated as a pastor. I was 20 years old and the new pastor of small churches. The woman's name was Violet. She had a faithful story to tell. She was a long-suffering widow who had lost her only child when the child was just three days old, but just above her name on the gravestone was the title "mother."

She had never traveled outside the state of Texas, never had a driver's license, didn't have indoor plumbing until she was retired, and so her life went.

I had the privilege of visiting her in the nursing care home where she spent her last days. Once while there I was trying to make conversation and noticed on the wall an old hymn framed in popsicle sticks. It was that old Christian hymn, "I'll Fly Away." It is a favorite hymn wherein the promises of God for everlasting life are celebrated — it sings like the psalmist of a glad morning when all will sing hallelujah and be taken to a comforting home that God has prepared.

So I see this hymn framed on the wall and I say to her, "Oh, is that your favorite hymn?" to which she replies, "No I can't stand that old song" I don't know why they made me do that, we made that project in crafts down the hall. Obviously it didn't provide much comfort in this life to Violet.

When she passed away, we were preparing for the memorial service and, of course, I was nervous; it was my first. Her nephew lived out of town, as I recall, and so the first time I met him was on the day of the service.

The service began, and before I gave the sermon, her nephew stood to speak. What he said was, "on my aunt's wall was a hymn of the church" so it must have been her favorite one, and we'll play it now! So, inside of course, I laughed so hard, which relaxed my nervousness. I suspect others in the congregation knew what I knew because she had told them the same thing, and they likely laughed, also, while others present, I'm sure, may have been comforted.

For a woman who had experienced such challenges and difficulties in her life to be sent out with a mixture of tears and laughter was probably very appropriate.

The psalmist said it: even though weeping may linger for the night, joy comes with the morning.

And it will come, for you and for me, and for the world. And it has come for these we name now. Would you please stand? We remember now dear friends those who we have entrusted to God's care.

Shelley Hartman Baker
Eula Lorraine DeBoer Bakker
Heidy Lynn Bowser
Ronald Lee Bynes
Jonah Cephus
Herbert Collier
Robert James Dawson
Augustina Ephraim
Christian Scott Estrada
Rev. Bruce Walter Felker
Deaconess Allene May Ford
Richard W. Friel
William H. Guggolz, Jr.
Lee Matthew Hartwell
Elaine Schoenvogel Huddleston
Hermann H. Knabe
Brenda Claire Goza Lindsey
Rev. Donald F. Maple
Frank R. Parish
Mary Jane Rosenbaum
Mami Lou Albertson Taylor
James Doyle Tynes
Linda Harrison Underwood
Rev. Charles Williams
Reohn Zeleznik