

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 6, 2011, All Saints celebration, dedicated to the memory of Arthur Vorys, Julia Hadley, Harrison Campbell and Fred Shuttlesworth and to all their family members, to the members of our congregation who have lost loved ones in this past year, and always to the glory of God!

A translation of Matthew 5:1-12 from the Aramaic:

When Yeshua saw the crowds, he went up the hill, and after he sat down, his students came to him. And he opened his mouth and began to teach them, and he said:

Blessings on the poor in spirit, for theirs is heaven's kingdom.

Blessings on those who grieve, for they will be comforted.

Blessings on the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessings on those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be fed.

Blessings on the merciful, for they will be treated mercifully.

Blessings on those with clean hearts, for they will see God.

Blessings on those who work for peace, for they will be called God's children.

Blessings on those who are oppressed for the sake of justice, for theirs is heaven's kingdom.

Blessings on you when people insult you and oppress you and tell all kinds of evil lies about you on account of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in the heavens.

That is how they oppressed the prophets who came before you.

“Blessings”

Revelation 7:9-17; Matthew 5:1-12

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Crowds always moved Jesus. Sometimes he was moved to great compassion by the crowds. At other times, their disbelief aroused his pity. Sometimes their selfishness caused him to wonder if they were following him only for loaves and fishes. Their sickness and illness gnawed at his heart. And their lostness and confusion filled him with a desire to show them the way to a true way of life." (Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, A Koinonia Publication from Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA, 4th printing, 1973, p. 20)

One day, as he looked on the crowd, Jesus saw that something was different. They were ordinary people but it wasn't an ordinary crowd. They were all aware that the world was crashing down upon them. They were aware that their civilization was sick unto death. They had reached the end of their rope. The Occupy Jerusalem crowd was stirring up and they didn't know what to do or where to go next with the anxiety, distress, hunger and oppression growing in them and around them.

Following the example of John the Baptizer, they had climbed down from a muddy Jordan River bank into the stream of living water and there admitted their wrongdoing and failings. They had repented of their sins. They rose refreshed and ready for a new way of life. With the unemployment growing and the empire breathing down their neck the stale air of oppression, the crowd turned to face the rabbi of Nazareth. He was a wonder-worker. He was a healer. He was a teacher. Many believed he was their savior.

Seeing them before him and knowing his moment was at hand, Jesus ascended the mountain, as Moses had before him. But, unlike Moses, Jesus went up the mountain with his

closest disciples. Like a baker, Jesus would knead the dough of deliverance and pass it onto the 12 who would in turn pass it onto the crowds. The pedagogy of this preacher was in place. There on a high and holy mountain, with the air of liberation pregnant with possibilities for new life and a new way to God's presence, Jesus sat down. Seated as a rabbi illuminating the texts of Torah, Jesus opened his mouth and taught them the steps they needed to ascend the pathway to the kingdom of heaven.

These teachings, known now as the Sermon on the Mount (found in Chapters 5-7 of Matthew) were about a total way of life faithfully lived out in God's realm, built on the law of Moses. They were more than lessons about good ideas to think about, ponder and passively step around. To follow this path would lead to eternal life.

Often called the preamble of the sermon, the first 12 verses are known to us as the "Beatitudes." Called the "Be-Attitudes" by some, the "Happy Attitudes" by others, the "Blessings" by most, these are eight teachings that set the virtuous course for the rest of the sermon - the stairway to heaven - if you will.

In Aramaic, the language of Jesus, the word for happy is translated "blessings." Jesus offers blessing upon blessing to those who follow him. Here we find neither lesson nor lecture. Rather, Jesus offers concrete responses to the needs of people, springing from his unshakable faith in people - particularly - the people of Israel.

Listen carefully as we slow down the eight blessings from Mt. 5:1-12. Receive them differently as you hear them with new ears and a new heart this day. Place yourself on the mountainside at the feet of Jesus. Receive these blessings on your pathway to eternal life.

They may sound more like Aramaic than Hebrew, but here are the blessings. Blessings upon you when your spirit has

been emptied so much that you are completely empty, the realm of God's heaven will be yours. Blessings upon you when you grieve, when you have lost much in your life. You shall not be all alone in your pain, you will be comforted. Blessings upon you who are gentle, you will be given care of the earth. Blessings upon you who get up in the morning and go to sleep at night, hungering and thirsting for justice, you will be fed. Blessings upon you who are merciful and kind to others, mercy and kindness will return to you. Blessings upon you who have a clean heart, you will see the face of God and live. Blessings upon you who work for peace, you will be God's special agents, God's most beloved children. Blessings upon you who are poor and oppressed in your fight for justice, the realm of God's heaven will also be yours. Blessings upon you when people insult you, bully you, beat you down, treat you ill and tell evil lies about you because of your faith, you will receive a just and great reward. This is the same way the prophets and saints were treated throughout the ages. They are all right now....

By living fully into these eight blessings, God is glorified and we are truly blessed.

On this All Saints Sunday, I wonder, whom have you known that has lived into one or more of these blessings? Who do you know or who have you known that has, through the virtues and values they have lived and the way they have loved, shown us the stairway to heaven?

Similarly, how might you live into these blessings, too?

As we step into our answers, we need to remember holiness is a complex concept and ALL the saints of God are complex people. For example, holiness involves two almost contradictory strands. On the one hand, someone or something that is holy has been "set apart." Almost simultaneously, the transcendent must be channeled back into the mundane for it to have meaning.

Consider St. Teresa of Avila. I love to tell the story of St. Teresa of Avila, who was fording a stream in Spain and got stuck in the current, raised her fist to heaven and proclaimed, "If this is the way you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them!" Our own 20th century saint, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, once yelled at one of her sisters that if she moved any slower during her cleaning, she would turn into a pillar of salt! You see, a saint of God must have a rigorous ego in order to give it away. Another way of saying this is, that a true saint of God must be a bit crazy. Instead, our favored song, *I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, which claims the saints to be "patient, and brave and true" might say instead the saints are "impatient, and fiery and challenging."

We must remember, it is not being virtuous that makes a saint: the Pharisees were virtuous and their virtues needed conversion. It not doing good that makes a saint. A saint often does good, but so do a lot of people we don't call saints. It is not practicing religion that makes a saint. Many of us practice religion, but like every part of us, our religious part needs conversion, too.

A saint is someone who has a strange nearness to God and makes God real and near to other people. A saint embodies the parable of the corn of wheat that falls into the earth and dies - so then, it can rise up again. His virtues don't make the saint proud, they keep him humble in the quest. Her sins and failings, which may be many and bitter, don't cast her down for the divine forgiveness humbles her again and again. He shares and bears the grief of his fellows. She feels the world's pain and cries in the face of such pain because of the heightened sensitivity to life and breath and God. He has a serenity of unearthly kind which brings peace and healing to other people. This strange blend of humility, sorrow, and joy is the mark of a saint. Through him, through her, God is made real and near.

Today, we lift up with great love and devotion Art, Julia, and Harry. Each one of them was beautiful. Each one of

them bore in their lives the marks of the saints of God. We truly became better people when we were in their presence. They loved us and called out the best in us. For this are eternally grateful.

In a moment, we will honor and glory in the memory of Art, Julia, and Harry today. We will sing them to heaven while we forever hold them in our hearts on earth.

As I look across the room, I am aware that many of you have lost mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. We have lost loved ones near and far away. Today is a time for all of us will also speak aloud the names of our loved ones and the departed saints of our lives whose memories we lift today. During the prayers of the people, I will lift my arm and slowly move it across the congregation. As I do, I invite you to name one or more people who have influenced and affected your life and who now rest in peace. Speak their names aloud. No matter what their faith or religion, if they have been a blessing to your life, if they have demonstrated God's love or pointed you toward the stairway to heaven, speak their names aloud. They may have been departed for years or passed to glory in the last 12 months. Speak their names aloud - lift their names for all to hear. They have blessed us. Now, let us bless them in prayer, in celebration and with joy.

And may the blessings of God be yours this All Saints Day. Amen.

Our closing benediction:

*May the **Lord** bless you, and keep you;*

*May the **Lord** make His countenance shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*

*May the **Lord** turn His countenance to you and grant you peace.*

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