

Matthew 5:1–12

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for All Saints Sunday, Year A (Revised Common Lectionary) · 1 November 2011

We'll start with Revelation 7:9–17. This is a fabulous text. We are working on All Saints Day, of course, and this text is from John of Patmos, John the Revelator, who has been sent into exile and who is just burning with the gospel: full of frustration, eager to set it out, confined, unable to let go, unable to get loose, and consequently singing at the top of his lungs.

So it's practically ecstatic. He has one leg up and probably a knee into heaven. He wants to tell us everything he sees there, and what he sees is just glorious. More fun than a barrel of monkeys. "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count." This is the looking of the apocalypse. It is typical apocalyptic literature: he is under great trial, and suffering deeply, he sees what no one can see. He sees deep into the heavens, and what he sees there is the result of the gospel: people from all over, from every corner of the creation, gathered together with the great promise. "For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them." As he has done all their life in faith, so even now in heaven the work is completed. In heaven itself he shelters them.

"For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Here we are seeing the end of the saints. This is what God has in mind for the saints: the restoration of heaven and earth, a new heaven and a new earth, an earth in which the renewal is accomplished, and therefore death is no more. He has snatched it back, taken back the garden from the evil one, and now everything is blooming again.

Psalm 34: Those Who Seek the Lord Lack No Good Thing

Psalm 34 has something of the same character. That's another beauty. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth." And up to verse 10: "The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."

Anybody who has been around lions knows what this is. The young lions do not suffer want. They are the most athletic animals, the hungriest, and the most insatiable. Once, when I was over in Tanzania with Dave Simonson, we came on a lion kill. It was one of the most inspiring things I've seen in my whole life. It looked like the Nestingens after Christmas. The lions had killed a water buffalo and had eaten the viscera first, so they had the guts, and they were lying on their backs with their bellies distended, hence the resemblance to my family, full beyond any measure, waiting for it to burn off so they could get up and eat again. The young lions suffer want, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing. They lack no good thing, not because they have it in their own possession, but because he assures us that nothing will be wanting. This is the promise to the saints.

1 John 3: Unknown by the World

So we have had a glimpse of where the saints are going, deep into heaven itself, and a glimpse of who provides for them. Then in 1 John 3:1–3 we get an idea of the current standing of the saints. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” These are the saints; you are the saints. “The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” That is, it doesn't know the one who called us.

So this is the current fate of the saints: to be unrecognized as saints, unknown as saints, more likely to be treated as fools and off-scouring, rejects, losers, outsiders, those who have no place. This is the fate of the saints: the world does not know what on earth is going on or who these strange critters are.

“Beloved, we are God's children now,” even under the sign of the opposite, even while being treated as unknown. We are God's children now. “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” There's more to come. We haven't seen it at all yet. “What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him.” We will be recognized in this: we look like him; we belong to him. Uncle Roy used to say we're baked in the same cake with him. We are part of him, and so we will be like him, “for we will see him as he is.” “And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” This is not a moral quality we achieve. We are being called to trim off everything else for this one purpose, that we might be found in him.

The Beatitudes

And now we come to the great text. This is so great: all the Beatitudes for All Saints Day. You could preach an hour on each one of them, I think. If you were in Africa, of course, that's what you would do: just get up, sit down in this text, and stay there for a good long time.

Now of course you know that the interpretation of the Beatitudes has been heavily controverted. The major temptation with the Beatitudes is to ethicize them, to make them into commands. So when you hear the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit," you take it as a summons to become poor in spirit, as if this were a quality you could achieve. Good luck. Or if you hear "meek," you become so meek that you can be proud of being meek, and you wish that all the other people in the congregation and in the synod and in the church were as meek as you, because then everybody would be better off. No, this is just foolishness. To ethicize the Beatitudes is flat-out to deny them.

The best way to take them is for what they are: blessings. They are blessings. Typically, Jesus is spilling over with them. This is the difference between us and him. We work from a perspective of shortage. We're always convinced we're going to run out, that death is going to get the last word, that there's going to be nothing left. We're always convinced that somehow our shortages are going to be exposed and finally we'll be back in the default position, which is lack.

But Jesus works from the logic of abundance. He is always spilling over with good. Mary tells him to make a little wine, and he makes a hundred and twenty gallons. You've got to like him for that, even after people have been drinking for three days already. That's Jesus. Or when he feeds the five thousand, he doesn't just stop when the cafeteria line is supplied. He keeps creating anew until there is excess spilling over everywhere. What he likes best of all is to bless, just to spill it.

And so he has an assembly here that looks like a short story from Flannery O'Connor. I think most of you know that great story, "Revelation," where Mrs. Turpin sits in the waiting room at the doctor's office holding court on everybody she sees. A girl is watching her, has her number, and calls her a warthog. Of course Mrs. Turpin takes out after her, and in the end she is down in the hog pen looking up, and she sees the heavens open and all the wild things on their way. She is pretty profane about it. All the cripples and all the fools and all the blacks and everybody else who has been despised in her culture, there they are, on their way in at

heaven's door. She can't quite believe it. And then she sees them all with their virtues and their vices being burned away.

Well, here you get the picture from Jesus. He is telling you who the saints are. He describes them in such colorful detail that if this text is appropriately preached, people should just laugh with enjoyment, because this is way too much fun. He is spilling blessings one after another, and he is picking out the wildest bunch to bless that you can possibly imagine. This is the church. This is what it looks like.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." These are the last people we would generally consider for a blessing. The poor in spirit are those who have no resources, nowhere to turn, nowhere to look in a time of need. They look at themselves, and what they see is emptiness. Several times I've preached on this beatitude at the funeral of a suicide. That is the ultimate poverty of spirit: death appears to be a friend and welcomes us to surrender into its arms, as though there were no other possibility. That is finally becoming so poor that we have nowhere to turn. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, those who have no resources to face the challenges that come. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

He's just getting warmed up. "Blessed are the meek": those who have a poor opinion of themselves, those who can never look you in the eye but keep shifting off to the side, those who are pretty well convinced they have nothing to offer and, if they open their mouths, convince themselves they were wrong even to try. Blessed are the meek.

"Blessed are those who mourn." I skipped over that one a moment ago. Good night, you are sitting in parishes serving people; you know what this is. I'll never forget sitting with an old man who had lost his wife. He said, "I can't stand to go to bed, because the bed is cold, and I stretch my foot over to find her, and there's nothing but more coldness there." Life is defined by the continual longing for one who is gone, for one who can't be there and won't be there. Blessed are those who mourn.

So the people who will be blessed, who are being blessed, are being defined by deficiency, by lack: those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek. And what is going to happen to them? They are going to inherit the earth. Everything turns right over.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Shouldn't it be, "Blessed are those who have transcended themselves; blessed are those who have turned their problems into possibilities; blessed are those who have achieved inner peace"? No:

blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. You have talked to these people. Some of you are these people. You know what this is. You wake up under the conscience's accusation. You look to yourself, and what you see is some old sin hung around your neck, still pointing its finger. You think of yourself and start putting yourself on the chart of sanctification, and you see minus three. I can't even get onto that thing, let alone achieve anything, and I wouldn't want to anyway. So here we go: blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, whose life is defined by repentance and who simply can't get any further than that. That's how it works.

"Blessed are the merciful." You know these people. They can't help it. They see somebody missing something, and they're right there. They walk by somebody who is lonely and tired, and they have an arm or a word. It is just in their nature; they are so defined by mercy that they can't think of anything else. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." They will be treated accordingly. They have no self-protection; they are completely vulnerable. They see the hurting and say, "What can I do?" They don't think to themselves, "I might get sued for this," or, "I don't dare stop here; I might get attacked." They see people in trouble, and they give themselves away.

"Blessed are the pure in heart." Maybe we should say: blessed are the naive. Blessed are the unself-protected. Blessed are the vulnerable. Blessed are the damn fools who don't know any better. Instead of calculating and looking to be top dog, trying to find an advantage, pushing themselves forward and overcoming the realities of life, they don't know any better. They are naive, unself-protected, and so they are blessed. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." He will turn and return all their gifts to them in the end.

"Blessed are the peacemakers." Again, this is a wild class of people to bless. We might say, blessed are the people in the park in New York, or blessed are the people over here in Salem, Oregon, who are occupying the state Capitol. Not quite. Blessed are those who make peace, those who risk being attacked by both sides, those who enter into the fight. You've all done this: been called out to an abuse situation where a husband is abusing his wife, or, more likely now, where an adult child is abusing a parent. You come in to make peace, and you discover that you've succeeded by turning both sides against you. More than once I've been beaten up by the abuser and the abused simultaneously. Blessed is this kind of thing. Blessed are the peacemakers who walk into the middle, looking to find a way.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Again, we think it should be the opposite: blessed are those who are rewarded for righteousness’ sake. Righteousness ought to be its own reward; we ought to be congratulated for our accomplishments. But the likely result of doing well is being punished. If you are effective at it, you are suspected of being a damn fool and an exploiter, somebody who is cheating or who has an advantage, and so the blessing is withheld and the curse comes down instead. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Christ Jesus decides in the end who the righteous are and who the impostors are, and he blesses you in particular, who are bearing this persecution for righteousness’ sake because you have held fast to the Word.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” This is the ultimate curse for the old Adam and the flesh: to be condemned. But the blessing is given freely and joyfully by Christ Jesus to those who have been defined over against the world around them by the word of his mouth and by the gift of his hand.

More likely than not, these people are going to be tempted day and night by bitterness and resentment. They start rehearsing and remembering all the times they’ve been reviled, rehearsing visions of retaliation and revenge, caught in the terrible cycle, returning again and again to remembrances of retaliation and revenge, just stuck. That’s the bondage of the will, plain and simple. That’s where we’re caught. We can’t let go of stuff like this. Like a magnet, we are drawn to it and attached. And so Christ Jesus enters with a different word. He doesn’t say “Dummy,” which he would be entitled to say, I expect. He says, “Blessed are you.” With this blessing he breaks the circle. He takes hold of us in the *incurvatus in se*, our despicable inwardness, our self-enclosure. He takes hold of us in the midst of it and breaks us open by saying, “Blessed are you.”

Blessed Are You

Now we should take a little look at that word “blessed.” Sometimes it’s translated “happy”: happy are they who. But in fact there’s something more here. We could say: righteous are they. Now there’s a word with a terrible reputation. Righteous means sanctimonious, or self-righteous, or stuck on the self. But when Jesus speaks this word, it is one of the richest words in the whole language. Righteous are they: they are in place. They are where they belong. They are in tune, aligned, in the position for which they have been called. And so they are blessed there, at home.

Righteousness is what happens when you come home to one of your kids. I was righteous last week when we were back in the Twin Cities. My little grandson, two years old, came running through the hallway, yelled “Bompa!” and jumped up into my arms. That’s about as righteous as I’ve ever been in my whole life. I’m where I belong, with whom I belong, in relationships unbroken at that point: restored, renewed, blessed. Blessed are you. You see, this is the blessing of God, the blessing of Christ Jesus, which he gives so freely and munificently to all of us.

So in going through these descriptions of the saints, you want to set them out in such a way that people recognize themselves, or recognize one another, in them. And you want to set out the blessing so that people have no question about who is being blessed. Blessed are you. Blessed are you. You are being blessed. You are being made righteous, placed in the position where you benefit from the work of Christ Jesus, where you are a joy to your neighbor and are welcomed by the earth, so that you can tend it and keep it as you were intended to.

So in the first lesson, Revelation 7, John the Revelator gives us a peek into heaven itself, so that we can see all those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, every last one of them. In the psalm we get an idea of the blessing Christ gives. In 1 John 3 we see the current status of the blessed: they are off-scouring to the world. And then in the Beatitudes we see Jesus blessing all those who have been cast aside, ostracized, left out, defined by shortage; who could never think of having enough, wouldn’t dream of it; who are looking to his hand, expecting good.

This is what it is to be a saint. What a sorry collection. It looks like Flannery O’Connor’s worst vision, but it is more fun than you can possibly imagine.

Questions and Answers

A question about why persecution most often comes from within the church rather than from the world.

Karl Barth used to say that the church is the oppressive institution, because this is where the God-sickness breaks out. This should be, of course, where the Word and the sacraments break out. But in fact, when you get sinners together, defined by what we lack, we turn on one another, convinced that somehow we’ve got it and others don’t. Many of us have had an opportunity to taste this firsthand. It’s just a consequence. So Christ Jesus comes to be our comfort, the one who blesses in a context like this, and the blessing comes.

A question about how the Erasmians turn Jesus' blessings into imperatives.

That's exactly what happened, Marnie. It's as though this were some message posted on the bulletin board down in Chicago: this is what we ought to become. But if you try that, it doesn't make any sense. How do you become poor in spirit? How do you achieve meekness? These blessings are for you as you are currently defined. They speak to you in the situation you're in; you don't have to go and find them.

A question about those who think they are not among the needy.

Yes, Brian, you've got it. Exactly. "Christ died for other people, but I'm free." It's ridiculous. The best way to deal with such bad money is to set out the real money. The gospel is for such sinners, who think they're saints even when in fact they couldn't make the list. It does not say, "Blessed are the self-transcendent; blessed are those who have finally gotten in touch with themselves; blessed are those two steps up the ladder."

A question about hearing the Beatitudes as goals to aspire to.

Julie, yes, I think so. This is what happens. This is our sin: we think Jesus is setting goals to aspire to. It's like that old joke about the man who was so proud to be humble, or, "Once I was conceited, but now I'm perfect." The minute the self hears the imperative, the old Adam starts aspiring, thinking, "I should be able to achieve this."

A comment suggesting "blessed" be translated "honored."

Sure: honored by Christ. That's just great, because it indicates what is happening here. He is taking us as the people who make the list, those of us named at various points along this hall of fame, those of us defined by what we lack, and aligning us with himself. He is placing us next to himself, so that we can rejoice in one another.

A comment recalling Vachel Lindsay's poem "General William Booth Enters into Heaven."

That's good. A lot of fun.

God bless you. You're in my prayers as we head for Sunday. These are magnificent texts; you can just about fall into them and live there. Christ keep you.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 1 November 2011 (about 48 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz5hXwRXP3E>

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