

Matthew 5:1–12

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for All Saints Sunday, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 29 October 2012

I'm making this early, because tomorrow I have to fly off into the sunrise and go back to beautiful Atlanta. So we'll go to work on these texts.

The texts for All Saints Sunday have one leg up over the edge of heaven's gate, and they're taking a good look, telling us who's in there and whom we can expect to see there, and so giving us a description of the saints and what they look like. Now, if this isn't dangerous, nothing is. If you know who they are, of course, you're somebody who needs to be watched, and especially if you know who they're not. That's where the danger really arises.

So these descriptions are a lot of fun, and of course they're full of joy, but for just that reason they evoke all kinds of contention. One objection comes from the traditional free-will interpreters of these texts, who insist that the Beatitudes are an eternal job jar, Jesus' list of things to be achieved: achieved with moral earnestness dripping from every intention, our self-transcendent, achieving selves in full gear, ready to join not only the Lions Club but the Kiwanis and live happily ever after. So they turn each of the Beatitudes into something to be achieved, as though this were a list of qualifications for the kingdom of God to which we must aspire, showing that we are finally worthy, good luck, of being admitted. And of course all of this comes complete with hectoring, careful monitoring of the quality of our intentions, the wagging finger and the steely eye. You can't have this much fun; not in this life. It's not allowed. We're sinners, after all, or at least there are other sinners around us, and we ought to be careful.

Now these people have met their match, I'm afraid, in the kind of casual universalism currently regnant in the churches. Since Jesus likes to bless, why not just lean back and enjoy it? Since he's blessing us, he must be blessing everybody, so let the blessings abound, let's have some fun, and forget the whole business. Of course you know how this works: the most truly blessed are those who can hold court on the rest of us who are not quite as blessed, because, after all, we want to maintain some standards. It all turns into a village where the truly open and the truly receptive and the truly tolerant gather to hold court on those who are less so, and

to teach us habits of mind that will take us beyond all this silliness. So what are blessings? What's the need of them? What in the world is he doing? He has blessed everyone; he must just be doing a few to keep himself in practice.

So on the one side this turns into a job jar, and on the other side it turns into an irrelevancy, and all the fun gets drained right out of the Beatitudes, this gorgeous text. Good night. So we're going to have to be real careful. We should have some fun with this text, because of course it's a riot. When Jesus starts blessing, you know he can't quit. He's got himself cranked up to full bore, and he's spilling grace all over everything, and it's pure joy.

So we're going to leave the naysayers and the yea-sayers behind and enter the text for this Sunday, and we're just going to have some fun with it, for Pete's sake, because All Saints Sunday, among other things, should be a delight. We're getting a peek into the future here. This is not grim versus ultra-grim. This is Christ Jesus, the Savior of the world, pouring out his welcome. Holy smokes. Nobody's better than he is.

The supporting texts are a bit of a glee club for this great concert, like the second choir at the church-school choir concerts, where the really good singers march in wearing the ultra-blue robes and the others wear black gowns. The supporting texts are the black-gown choir, but pretty good. The text from Revelation 7 could sing a solo in just about any choir in the world and command an audience, so we'll have to go there. Psalm 149 and 1 John 3 are also alive with joy, even if there's a little more *Schadenfreude* in the psalm, which is kind of hard to live with. The first verses of 1 John 3 are alive too. But beside the Gospel they become the black-gown choir, because the blue-gown choir has a soloist dressed in white.

This is the Lamb: not just any old lamb, not some stray lamb that happened along looking for a home. This is the Lamb, capital L, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. And I'll tell you what: by the time he gets done blessing, there's not one thing in the world you need to do about it. Just laugh and enjoy it, because he isn't going to hand over a blessing and say, "All right, you buggers, you'd better qualify." When he hands over a blessing, the blessing accomplishes exactly what it set out to do. It becomes a blessing. And when you hear his voice, when he turns to you and says, "Blessed are you," you're one of the saints, no matter what you think of yourself. Especially those of you who are poor in spirit: you know you're some of his favorites, so you might as well relax and have some fun with it.

So we'll work our way through the supporting texts as we usually do, and then go to Matthew 5. I thought for a while of combining Revelation 7 and Matthew 5, but you really can't do that. The Beatitudes demand time of their own, and we're going to give it to them. So we'll have to give a lick and a promise to passages where we'd like to stay and dwell a while. But of course we only have so much time; in heaven we'll be able to continue this discussion at leisure, and some of our favorite sinners will be there to take part in it, cracking jokes a mile a minute, as usual.

Revelation 7: The Great Multitude

The song in Revelation 7:9–17 reverberates with the gospel. This is John the Seer, John the apocalypticist, pinned up over there on Patmos, burning with zeal, unable to take part himself in the conflicts across the water in what is now Turkey, and as eager as he can possibly be to bear witness to Christ Jesus. So in Revelation 7 he bursts out in this magnificent song.

He is looking into heaven, and he can see there the great multitude being gathered, from the whole earth, from every nation. Now it has been accomplished. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them," and here they come: ragtag and tattered, beaten and sorrowing, but here they come, marching in the multitude of Christ's song, singing their hearts out. And the song they are singing is the song of salvation. They have been numbered among the keepers. They are the saints, the ones Christ has called and sustained and has now brought to himself.

And the angels and the elders join in the song. Isn't this fun? Blessing and all that goes with it belongs to the Lamb. He is the one who controls all blessing, and he has distributed it to this magnificent army, so his blessing falls on everyone. "And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God." Well, what else is there to do? Finally there's nothing left of you. Finally you've been delivered from yourself. Finally the saints are free from all the conflict that is part of life and faith, and they have been brought before Christ Jesus, before the Lamb, and so they sing: "Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!" "They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." They have suffered, they have endured, and now they have conquered.

“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.” Later on, in Revelation 21, we’ll come to the great promise: no more church, no more temple. Forde was always real happy about that. He said the worst thing that could happen would be to die and wake up at a synod assembly. You can imagine. “They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; 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.” How about it? Looks pretty good to me.

Here we go. He has gotten a peek over all the intervening years. He has seen all the way to the end, and when he sees all the way to the end, what he sees is an eschatological banquet, set for the whole world, for all the saints now gathered from everywhere. You remember the list at Pentecost. Now it has been expanded: Tanzanians and Ethiopians, South Africans, Australians, New Guineans of every tribe. What a dance it’s going to be! We’ve all been assembled. I hope I’ll be able to sit and watch, but I’d rather join the dance, actually, and I’m trusting Christ Jesus to bring me there. I hope, I hope, I hope.

Psalm 149: Joy Without Schadenfreude

So we go to Psalm 149. This opens with the same kind of thrilling, joyfully expressed praise and thanksgiving, for the fact that God takes joy in his people. There it is: he rejoices in his saints. He is delighted to have gathered himself such a flock, and he rejoices in them like a shepherd looking over his flock.

But here’s the trouble with these passages, and why we’re a little apprehensive about them. The insiders look at the outsiders and give thanks for them, because, after all, if there weren’t outsiders, it wouldn’t be any fun to be insiders. That’s what you call *Schadenfreude*, joy in other people’s suffering, as the German has it. So I’m not entirely happy with this passage.

One of my favorite things about being a pastor is talking with people who are old and mature in their faith, and almost always there’s no *Schadenfreude*. Instead there’s anxiety that someone hasn’t heard it yet. Isn’t that fun? I remember my dear old grandma. She worried herself silly over this, that someone might not have heard the gospel. Can you imagine? The gospel is like that. It creates an appetite for itself. It creates joy in itself, and it creates a longing that everybody will hear it. So if you’re going to preach on this text, I’d say take the front end and leave the *Schadenfreude* to take care of itself. The old Adam is good at that: delighting in

everybody else's suffering while counting up the blessings he claims to be entitled to. So the opening verses of the psalm set us up for a joyous festival in God's salvation.

1 John 3: See What Love

1 John 3:1–3 has the same character as the first two, though the *Schadenfreude* is missing here. The first verse spells out the basis for the celebration: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

I'm a little apprehensive about the last part of that. To claim "we are" can be to claim a possession. Julie observes that her old congregation printed pamphlets saying that one of the joys of being a Christian was that it was going to be so much fun to watch the un-Christians burn. That's a good way to get singed yourself, I'd say.

Anyway: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God." There is cause for rejoicing. But that word is always *extra nos*. It always comes from outside us. It never becomes a possession. And when we say "and that is what we are," we can say it only because of Christ's investment in us. So the concluding phrase drives us right back to the promise of his love. In other words, it cannot be a possession. We can be certain; we can never be secure. That's the difference. Certainty always refers us to Christ Jesus. Security refers us to ourselves, and quickly becomes the *incurvatus in se*, the self curved in on itself, and then we're back in the same old ballgame.

"The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." In fact this is part and parcel of the Christian life: we are aliens. We have been taken up into the possession of another. We've lost ourselves; we're adrift in his hand. And so we're a little weird, and lots of us, I'm afraid, have exceeded the norm by a considerable margin. We're a little different, because we live by another word. This is not "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get." It's not "See how many partners you can have." It's not "You'd better actualize yourself." This is self-loss and strangeness, talking about the death of the self and all this other stuff. So we're a little different, a little weird. The world does not know us. It can't figure us out. It thinks we're strange, dismisses us on the basis of all kinds of pretenses, and wants to get rid of us.

"Beloved, we are God's children now." Now listen to that: we are God's children now. Why? Not because we possess some quality that takes us beyond judgment, but because he has made this promise to us, and as long as that promise holds, the conclusion holds. We are God's

children now because of the promise made to us. “What we will be has not yet been revealed.” Well, it’s true. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” The end of the story has been written, but it hasn’t been told to us yet. It hasn’t appeared. But we know this: “when he is revealed, we will be like him.” We can see our reflection in his eye.

I always love that. One of my favorite things nowadays is watching my dear Carolyn with her grandkids. They’re my grandkids too, and I love them dearly and have a lot of fun with them. But I’ll tell you, a grandma’s love is like a miracle. It’s bulldozer-powerful and unrelenting. When I see my granddaughters reflected in her eye, I just say, “Pure power.” Is it ever fun?

It does not yet appear what we shall be. Right now we’re a reflection in his eye. But sometime it will all be clear, and our hope and our prayer and our joy and delight and expectation is that it will turn out that we look like him. “Say, isn’t that one of the Olsons, or the Petersons, or the Johnsons?” We look like him. “He looks just like his old man.” There you go. He looks just like the one who delivered him. That’s the promise: by the time Christ Jesus is done with us, we will be conformed to his image, as the apostle Paul says. We’ll be more than a gleam in his eye. We’ll actually look like him. “We will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves.” Well, of course: when that’s your hope, you want to be like him. Come on!

Matthew 5: Blessed Are You

Now we’re going to go to Matthew 5, because we’ve got all this stored up and we’ve got to go get it. This is a promising text. “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain.” In 1980 Carolyn and I were in Israel, and we saw the traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount. Boy, it’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen in my whole life. If it didn’t happen there, it should have. If the Redeemer of the world was looking for a place to preach, that’s the kind of place he should have preached: just perfect, set up north of the Sea of Galilee, looking down over the sea, beautiful rolling hills, just gorgeous. And you can just see him going up the side of the mountain.

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” The crowd is probably mixed, but Matthew tells us it is his disciples who came to him. These are people who have already been hearing his word. They have been joined to him in such a way that they’ve followed him out into the boondocks, out of Capernaum and a little further west, up along the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. They’re up there on the mountain, which is not a mountain like the Rockies. It’s a mountain more like the Turtle

Mountains in North Dakota. How's that for a comparison? Big hills. They're disciples enough that they've gone out there with him. This is the disciples he is talking to. "Then he began to speak, and taught them." He taught the disciples, and this is what he said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek," and so on.

Now we should look at this word "blessed." Blessed are you. First of all, you know this word is not in the imperative. It is stated flat out in the indicative, and it is stated as Jesus' word. Jesus is handing over a blessing. And we know this about Jesus' words: when he said to the blind man, "See," he saw. When he awakened the little girl they were already mourning, she got up. And when the paralytic was lowered down to him and he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven," and they doubted him in their hearts, he said, "All right, so that you may know: stand up, take your mat and walk." And that little guy, who hadn't moved a muscle in years, got up, picked up his bed, and walked away. That's what Jesus' word does. It accomplishes what it sets out to do. So when he says to you, "Blessed are you," you're blessed.

He's not waiting for you to kick something into gear. This is not the imperative; it's the indicative. He's not waiting for you to contribute something. He's giving you something. So just stand there and try not to drool. Just stand there and let the blessing pour over you. What could be better than this? The crucified and risen Christ is the one who stands behind these blessings. And whom does he call blessed? He doesn't say, "Blessed are the striving. Blessed are the morally earnest. Blessed are the self-transcendent. Blessed are those who have really tried hard and applied themselves." He says, "Blessed are those, blessed are those, blessed are those," and he hands over the blessing.

I was looking through some of my old commentaries, and in that old Bornkamm-Barth-Held book one of them was arguing, of all things, that this was addressed to the antinomians. I nearly split. Of course, the antinomians are the usual bogeyman. There's no such thing as an antinomian. The antinomians all make rules against people who make rules, and they enforce them. We found that out in the ELCA. A bunch of us who believed there was a law got kicked out for believing there's a law, ten of them: thou shalt not, thou shalt. Well, these Beatitudes aren't addressed to antinomians, for Pete's sake. They're blessings. If the world would only get it through its sick head! Of course it's the old Adam that wants to make them achievable, measurable, accomplishable, conditions for entering the kingdom of God. Dumb as a post! I can't imagine it. "Blessed are you." "Well, just a minute; let me see if I've accomplished that."

The Poor, the Mourning, the Meek

Look at what you'd have to accomplish if you wanted to turn these into imperatives. First of all, you'd have to become poor in spirit. Good luck. All of you are parish pastors, men and women who hang around with people in congregations. You know people who are poor in spirit, of course you do, and you know how they became poor in spirit.

Whenever I read this beatitude I think of a friend of mine from high school. She was from West Fargo, the daughter of close friends of my parents, so I knew her that way. She was a beautiful young woman, just lovely. Her nose was a little out of proportion to the rest of her, as a result of surgery and some radiation treatment she'd had as a child, and that marred her in some ways. But she was so utterly lovely in every other way that you saw right past it. And she was smart as a whip. She went away and taught at one of the great Ivy League schools; she had a fabulous mind. And she committed suicide. It was devastating for her family and for the rest of us who had known her earlier. You know how suicide is. It slops blood all over everybody, like a car going through a puddle: it's up on you and you can't help it.

Whenever I think of being poor in spirit, I think of her: not because she was a dumb bunny or lacking in some way, but because she was convinced there was something so utterly wrong with her that there was no alternative left but to do away with herself. I've preached on this beatitude many times at the funerals of suicides. There is no greater poverty of spirit than to surrender to death, and you can't blame the person who thus surrenders. This is Jesus himself blessing the poor in spirit. Golly, don't start aspiring to that. If you want to be poor in spirit, he might let you. Good luck. That's not what he's looking for. He is blessing people who believe they are unqualified for any kind of blessing, who look at themselves and say, "Holy smokes, this is all I've got. The cupboard's bare. It's empty."

Look at the next one: "Blessed are those who mourn." Do you want to go there? How badly would you like to be one of those who mourn? It can be arranged, of course, if you want to achieve this. I deal routinely with people whose whole lives have been defined by loss. Blessed are those who mourn. Don't go looking to mourn; don't be a dumbhead. If you want to be a dumbhead, it can be arranged. Holy mackerel. But when you mourn, you mourn because there's no alternative. And when your life has been kicked into mourning, what is there? Just one promise: "you shall be comforted."

“Blessed are the meek.” I think this could be translated, “Blessed are those with a poor self-image.” Blessed are those who think ill of themselves, who look in the mirror and say, “Geez, what an ugly-looking bastard. Can’t you do any better than this?” Blessed are the meek, the submissive, those who are a little naive, those who don’t know any better, those who don’t have what it takes. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Again they are defined by what they lack, and Christ Jesus doesn’t challenge them to become meek: “You could be a real member of the kingdom of God if you were meek.” Nonsense. The meek are meek not because they’ve achieved it but because the conditions of life have worked it in them. They’ve been driven to the point where they look at themselves and see an empty cupboard. They’ve been kicked and thrown and tossed and turned by the tides of life, and they don’t know where to turn. Well, their Savior is speaking now. Your Savior is speaking now. And what does he say? “Blessed are you. Blessed are you.” This is great.

The Merciful, the Pure in Heart, the Peacemakers

And now we get what I call the Beatitudes for the excessive. Whereas the previous ones were for those who lack, now we get a series of three for people who have been carried beyond themselves. “Blessed are the merciful.” They can’t help it. The merciful look at life and say, “Why is it like this? What can we do?” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

And what about the pure in heart? Here’s another group famous for its naivete. Blessed are those who don’t know any better, who have no alternative, who have been carried beyond themselves by the forces of life and so can only see good, optimistic and encouraged. I think of my father-in-law with this one. I once said about him that he could find a ray of light in a coal bin at midnight. Somebody went and told him I’d said that, and he came back and said, “Thank you.” He was so proud that I’d said it about him, and it was true. He was pure in heart; he looked for the good in everybody. It was just a joy.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Instead of organizing a defense fund, peacemakers start making friends with their enemies. That’s crazy. It’s fun.

The Persecuted

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” Now we get some of the Beatitudes particularly for disciples. If you start hanging around with Jesus, you know what happens. You start to look like him, and when you hang around with him long enough, pretty

soon the devil starts making crosses fitted right to you. Your master went down on one; well, I've got one for you too. And so you're persecuted. If you don't believe it, remember the last annual meeting, or if you still don't believe it, go to another one.

I just heard about a good friend of mine up in Washington, one of the four Lutheran pastors left in the whole state, who just walked out. They cut his salary; they were after him; and he just left. I grieve. There's hardly anybody left out here in these two synods. You could drive a semi through here, a log truck sliding sideways, and you wouldn't injure a Lutheran, because there are so few and they're hiding. Well, the congregation got on top of him, and he said, "I'm just not going to take it anymore," and I could hardly blame him, and he walked out.

Well, persecution is part of the ticket. You hang around with him, you're going to get it. He can arrange it, and he does arrange it. He brings us deep down with him under the sign of the cross, and it is there, in the midst of persecution, that we discover the joy of dying with him. That's fabulous. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." Do you want to be one of those? This is not something we campaign for. It happens over the course of the Christian life. And when it happens, it hurts like hell, and you say to yourself, "He's forgotten me. He's let me go. I've been flushed. I'm on my way down; there's nothing left." And what does he say? "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

Here's what's going to happen in heaven. He's going to say the same thing to you that he's saying right now: "Blessed are you." And if you haven't made the list yet, just look at it a little more closely. If you haven't found yourself on this list, it's because you haven't been looking real closely. He is looking for you. He is going to find you. He has found you, and he has blessed you, and he is going to bless you again and say, "Blessed are you."

Can you imagine what you'll see in heaven? I'll tell you what it looks like. It looks like a Flannery O'Connor short story. You remember her great story "Revelation," with all the freaks and all the other offscourings gathered there, and Mrs. Turpin, kind of offended but delighted. That's who we are with the Beatitudes: old Mrs. Turpin. And he's tickling us until finally we just laugh and say, "Bless them all. Take them all." We want neighbors; we want sinners with us. We want to be blessed with you. If you bless us, we're blessed. There you go.

So the trick with this text is to fiercely resist any attempt by the pious to ethicize it, and any attempt by the tolerant to turn it into pabulum. Just stand up there and say these blessings. And

when you say them, be sure to indicate who is being blessed. You've been around the congregation long enough; you don't have to call them by name. You know the qualities of your people, and you know whom this blessing is aimed at. There is nothing more fun, absolutely nothing, than standing in Christ's name with your hand on some sinner's head and saying, "Blessed are you, for the kingdom of heaven is yours." So let the morally transcendent stay home, and let the smug and contented drift away. We're going to join the party, because he is bringing us in.

Have a glorious All Saints Sunday. I hope you sing "For All the Saints." I've never once been able to sing that hymn with a dry eye. I see my whole family going by, sinners every one of them, rejoicing in him. God bless you.

SOURCE

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Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6QJz_WQ8u0

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