

All Saints' Sunday
Year A
Matthew 5:1-12
"Yours Is the Kingdom of God"

Goal: That the hearers believe more firmly that they are blessed eternally through the merits of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 5:12, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven."

God has blessed the ministry of Word and Sacrament that has gone out from this place for 70 years. See how many people have been received into God's Kingdom and have been made to be the heirs of eternal life from this baptism font in the waters of Holy Baptism. Recall how many sermons have been preached from this pulpit declaring that the crucified and risen Christ calls sinners to repentance and restores them to life through the cleansing sacrifice of His blood shed for all on the Cross. Picture how many have feasted on the fruits of our Lord's death and resurrection as it has been distributed through the means of His true body and blood in the unleavened bread and wine of Holy Communion. Fed and nourished with Christ, we have His promise that He lives in us, and where Christ lives, we, too, shall live forever as well. Truly, His Word does not return empty. It fulfills the plan and purpose for which it was sent and for which it continues to be sent.

To that end Scripture's message has always remained the same: we are justified, saved by grace, through faith, for Christ's sake. Through the gift of faith granted by the Holy Spirit to you in the waters of Baptism or in the hearing of the Word—right now, you enjoy all the blessings of Christ in this life and for the life to come.

(Pause) Today is also All Saints' Sunday. We remember those who have gone ahead of us in the Christian faith. Our Gospel reading is the "Beatitudes" as recorded in Matthew chapter 5. "Blessed," Jesus says time and again in these verses.

But what does this all mean not only for the occasion of All Saints' but also for the occasion of celebrating the anniversary of this congregation? The context of the Scripture shows that the Beatitudes begin this lengthy portion in Matthew's Gospel known as the "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus has gone up the mountain to be with the gathered crowd. He opens His mouth and begins to teach His disciples on statements of present and future blessings.

The Beatitudes fall into the second section of Matthew's Gospel where Jesus begins His public ministry in word and deed to Israel with these words of 4:17, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus is the kingdom of heaven. Everything that had been spoken of Him in the past by the prophets was now fulfilled. The promised Savior had come to rescue His people from their sins. What was to be their response? To repent—to turn from their own self-seeking, self-centered ways. To turn from worshipping false gods and idols of their own making. The Savior was in their midst in human flesh.

"Repent," means to turn from sin. It's God's Law that accuses us of our sin through the 10 Commandments. How do we match up? Do we fear, love and trust in God above all things? Do we keep His Name holy, remember the Sabbath Day, or honor those in authority? Do we uphold the sanctity of life, keep our minds pure from lustful thoughts and our eyes from bouncing around to every piece of flesh that walks by? Do we honor the marriage bed and protect our neighbor's reputation and best interests?

If you have failed to keep any one of these Commandments, then you are guilty of not just breaking one of God's Laws, but **all** of God's Laws! God's Law accuses you of your sin. "Repent," Jesus says, "because I, the Kingdom of Heaven, am here!"

(Pause) The Beatitudes are beautiful Gospel, Good News of those blessings God has given us. But how so? We don't measure up to God's Law. How can the Beatitudes possibly be blessings of Good News that we need right now?

By grace through faith, we have been brought into Christ's kingdom as His blessed children. In Baptism, we were clothed with Jesus Christ Himself, given the gift of faith, and the forgiveness of our sins. We were made to be "saints," that is, holy in the sight of God.

Look how the Beatitudes describe this so beautifully for us. The first four beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit"; "Blessed are those who mourn"; "Blessed are the meek" and "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" describe all people in terms of our inability.

Our inability is that we have nothing to offer God spiritually. We are conceived "poor in spirit." We "mourn" because of our inherit sin. We are "meek" because we have no status and are powerless in the sight of God. We are the ones "hungering and thirsting for righteousness." We, who have been accused by the Law, need to have the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ dying and rising for our sins, proclaimed to us.

And that's just what Christ does for His people! We who are "hungering and thirsting for righteousness" know by faith that God's saving action has come through His Son Jesus Christ. God sends Jesus to the Cross bearing all of our sins and the wrath of God against us because of our sin. Jesus died the death that we truly deserved. As one of my seminary professors used to say, "Christ has forgiven us more sins than we got."

The next four beatitudes—"Blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are the persecuted"—tell us exactly what Christ Jesus

has put into our lives through the gift of faith. We are His baptized children who now strive to live and act differently from the world.

By the Holy Spirit, we now show the characteristic of being “merciful.” It is impossible for those who have been forgiven by the blood of Jesus Christ to remain unforgivable and unforgiving to others in our lives. Dear friends, I know that living in the midst of COVID has been hard. It’s got everyone on edge. Live in grace. Give grace. It’s what Christian people are called to do by Christ!

We have been made “pure in heart.” In Psalm 24, the psalmist says, “Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His Holy Place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up His soul to an idol or swear by what is false” (vv. 3-4).

God’s house of worship is a hospital for sinners. You have broken many of His Laws this past week. But still, Jesus invites you to come. You are His forgiven child in Baptism. He wants you to return to those Baptismal waters on a daily basis for the forgiveness of your sins. He has given you a “pure heart” and “clean hands” because His blood cleanses you. He makes you ready to approach His Table where He will put into your body, His very own body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith.

You are “peacemakers.” This means that you serve as a mediator between two contending parties and try to make peace. You are the very ambassadors of reconciliation. These God calls His sons because they are like Him.

Finally, because you are a disciple of Christ, you can be sure that you will be persecuted. You will be made fun of and ridiculed because of your faith in Christ. Do you want a real-life example of this? Look at what happened to our churches over Holy Week. They were declared “non-essential” and ordered not to meet by our governor and by many

others across the United States. Trouble and tribulation are a present reality. The devil hates the word of God and will do anything he can and use any means possible to stop its spread and to scare and put fear into God's people from hearing and receiving it.

(Pause) To everything that Jesus tells us, notice carefully what He says in Matthew 5:12, "Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven." Rejoice and be glad? Doesn't Jesus understand what's going on the world right now? Riots? Virus? Enemies attacking Christians? Christians attacking one another? Jesus says, "Yes, I know exactly what's going on because I bore the sin of the world for you on the Cross. Rejoice and be glad. Why? Because I have given you many and abundant blessings in this life and for the life to come. You are "blessed" because of Me!"

Jesus gives you the blessings of His Word, water, and body and blood right now for the forgiveness of your sins and the strengthening of your faith. And not only that, in eternal life, you will "rejoice and be glad," because you can be absolutely sure that Christ has fed and nourished you for this day.

We are "blessed" because of Christ and now live out these blessings to others. I invite you to live in those blessings daily that Christ freely gives. Be hungry for His Word in devotion and Bible study. If you have children, make it your number one priority to bring them to church and Sunday School and teach them God's Word throughout the week. Make a concerted effort to always be in God's house of worship—He gives you the "pure heart" and the "clean hands." Daily confess your sins and ask Him through the working of the Holy Spirit to amend your sinful life.

(Pause) Dear friends, it was my privilege to be your pastor for one week shy of 16 and half years. I am honored that you have invited me to come and preach today. To God be the

glory! So, let's be honest. I love you, and I know that you love me in return. But there have been some members who have not come to church since I left in January. There have been some members who have not come back to church since things shut down in March. I get it, and trust me, I hear about all the time across the District—these past months have been hard.

Now is not the time to tear each other and keep tearing each other apart. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to be on your knees confessing your sins and receiving the forgiveness of Jesus. You need to be hearing and receiving the gifts of Jesus. You need to be preparing “this house,” your house, your temple to be ready to receive your new pastor. This church was never built around me. It is built around Christ. He's the focus of your life. Now is the time to come back and participate. Now is the time to receive joyfully what Jesus wants to give to you. Without His nourishment, your love will grow cold. Your faith will wither. It will be even easier for you to become angry and join along with the world.

“Rejoice and be glad,” Jesus says. Yours is the kingdom of God. The fields are ripe before our eyes. You all have a family member, a neighbor without a church home. Invite them here to hear the Good News of Jesus.

What will the next 70 years of Faith, Abilene look like? Well, for one, you have a new pastor coming! And you know what? Pastor Barlau is going to proclaim the Word of God and deliver His Sacraments to you just like I did. This is how Christ builds His Church. This is how He strengthens you for service in His kingdom as His baptized as you daily live in this fallen world.

Yes, God has “blessed” you by making you holy and by now setting you apart for work in His kingdom. It's my prayer that you will always live in those blessings that He continually showers upon us in this life and for the eternal life to come. Amen.