

Today is All Saints' Day, and we are given Matthew's Beatitudes to consider. These beatitudes can help us to understand that today is a "thin" day, a "thin" place, a day when that great cloud of witnesses, all those saints who have gone before us, seem closer at hand than usual. These beatitudes take, and acknowledge, and embrace human sorrow and grief, and remind us that we are not alone in those times and that those times are not forever. They also represent a tremendous amount of information for us to be asked to process in one sitting. We have heard these Beatitudes so much over the years that their very familiarity can make them seem trite, routine. Like things we simply accept in a home, or our church, because we are so used to seeing them, which to a visitor would appear out of place, odd. How can we listen to these beatitudes, so that we hear and see them with new and fresh eyes and ears?

What we are given in Matthew today is big and important. In the very first verse of our Gospel selection we hear that Jesus sees the crowds, goes up to the mountain, sits down facing his disciples and begins to speak, teaching them. Seems rather innocuous. This verse is deceptively simple, for it is packed full of important theological metaphors: Jesus goes "up the mountain". Matthew is providing imagery of Moses here. He is alerting the hearer of this Gospel that something important is coming. Matthew doesn't stop there: Jesus sits down. Big deal, right? Well, in ancient times, when a rabbi was going to teach and say profound things, he sat down and faced his students. (We have vestiges of this tradition still: universities and their "chairs" given to professors, Bishops given a "cathedra" in which to sit as one of the symbols of their office.)

Our translation then says, "Jesus began to speak and taught them, saying" which can also be translated from the original Greek as "he opened his mouth and taught them." This is an important phrase. To those original hearers they would have understood that something solemn, important and dignified was about to be spoken. More importantly though (and we are going to get technical in regard to grammar and tense here), in the original Greek, the tense utilized does not translate into English. The tense used in our translation is the past tense. In Greek the tense used indicates continuous action, repeated action, habitual action. This point is important to understand, because this tense is not like our past tense, when the action talked about is a *one time* action: "I bought a car yesterday." Matthew is telling us: *Jesus opened his mouth and this is what he used to teach them repeatedly*. Matthew is actually telling us, here at the beginning of his Gospel, that these nine beatitudes are a summary of what Jesus continuously, repeatedly taught his disciples. No wonder this Gospel, if understood in this way, can be seen as overwhelming. We have all of Jesus' teachings, provided for us on this All Saints' Day.

And Jesus says all these various states of being are "Blessed". The Greek word for Blessed can also be translated: fortunate, blissful, happy, even "congratulations to". The overarching meaning is that the individuals Jesus is lauding are in right relation with God. These nine pronouncements we heard today from Matthew are blessings, are congratulations given by Jesus to the very real Christians living in Matthew's community, with an acknowledgement that being a Christian, being human, is never easy. Jesus is reminding us today that we need to trust God, trust that things will get better: perhaps not how we have carefully planned them, but better nonetheless.

We are given this overarching direction today, this theological statement of purpose by Matthew on this All Saints' Day. Our prayers, the lessons, the music, this Gospel selection, all reflect this feast

day's importance to the Church. Who are these saints we honor today? This feast day goes back to the late 300s AD, 1700 years ago. This day was originally established to celebrate *all* the Christian saints, *known and unknown*. We honor those who have gone before us this day, and *we are reminded* that there *will be* those who follow after us.

Honoring saints has a long tradition. The book that replaces *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, called *Holy Women, Holy Men, Celebrating the Saints*, provides us with daily examples of known saints. But what about the unknown saints that we celebrate this feast day? Who are they? The unknown saints can be, and *are, us*: when we live into the beatitudes Jesus lists for us today --- when we listen to and actualize our actions to those commands --- when we listen to what Jesus repeatedly taught. When we do this, when we actually recognize that we can and do live into these beatitudes, we show our true and better selves to others. We have to recognize that this is no water-downed Gospel....this is strong and off-putting and challenging.

By being meek, merciful, hungry for righteousness, being pure of heart, being peacemakers, we are living into, helping to create God's Kingdom, opened for all by Jesus. When we mourn, are persecuted, down in the dumps in regard to our faith, Jesus is saying he is not far from us and that (quoting a current ad campaign) "It gets better." This is a hope-filled-trajectory that Jesus provides to a torn and dejected and, many times, lost world. And many of us are, or have been all of these things at one time or another in our lives.....meek, in mourning, hungering for righteousness, merciful. Not all at one time but we have been in these different places. And note the importance of the tenses Jesus utilizes, the present and the future: *we are* meek, *we will* inherit; *we are* mourning, *we will be* comforted. Jesus is saying *Things will get better, things will be better, in the kingdom*. We have to remember that Matthew was writing to, and for, a community that was under siege, under attack, persecuted for their belief in the risen Jesus.

We celebrate today those known saints who modeled a life for us based, sometimes only in part, on Jesus' teachings. We also celebrate all those unknown saints who lived and live an anonymous life, like most of us. Those people who took on a sacred trust and preserved, improved and protected that sacred trust for future generations, withstanding persecution and dislike....persevering through our hunger and thirst for righteousness to get to the time of being filled.

We absolutely celebrate ourselves today as well. We celebrate our efforts to be our *better selves*. We celebrate God's love for us and our efforts to be better individuals.... We celebrate our efforts to live into the sacred trust given us as stewards of St. Christopher's, for a time, knowing we are preserving, improving and protecting it for those who will follow us. We do this modeling that cloud of witnesses that surrounds us on this "thin" day...this day when those who have gone before, and all of us and all of those who are going to follow us, are so very real and present to us.....

We also celebrate our own acts of grace-inspired will, to live a life where we do not turn a blind eye to those who are in need....and acknowledge that at times, *we* are that person in need..... We are not perfect, but God is saying to us today in these beatitudes, this summary of all of Jesus' teachings, that we are perfectible. Knowing that Jesus opened his mouth and continuously, repeatedly, habitually is teaching us can help us reach for that perfection, or at least our better selves...and trust God.... Through the grace of God and our own will, we can be in a relationship with this world of ours, allowing ourselves, willing ourselves, to be that unselfish, benevolent, loving, patient presence in the world.....modeling Christ for all to see. Amen.