

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

All Saints Day, as you know, is on November first, but we celebrate it on the Sunday on or after the first. All Saints Day was created early in the church's history. The practice in those days was to celebrate the date of a person's death as their birthday into heaven. This was a time when most people didn't even know their actual birthdays. That was just not something people considered important enough to keep track of, with the exception of kings and other elites. But for early Christians, who trusted in Jesus' promise of resurrection and everlasting life, the day of their death became an important day to remember, to be reminded of that promise and to celebrate it. Before long, though, the calendar was filling up with these celebrations of important people in the life of the church – especially those who had been leaders, and those who had suffered or who had been martyred for the faith. So it was decided that there would be a single day in the calendar for all the saints, all the church's leaders and witnesses who had died. For a long time, the church made a distinction between the ordinary faithful who die in the faith, and the heroes of the faith, those deemed to be exceptionally faithful, virtuous, and worthy, and All Saints was for that latter group. But ordinary people got their own day to be honored, called All Souls Day (also called Day of the Dead), which is now November 2. In the churches of the Reformation we have removed this distinction, and we celebrate *all* of the baptized who have died on a single day. That's why we started with a Thanksgiving for Baptism this morning, and why we included a remembrance of all the saints there. It's why today in our prayers we will bring that remembrance and celebration a little closer to home as we remember our sisters and brothers in faith, fellow members of Grace, who have died in the past year, and toll a bell as their names are read out. And it is why we will have an opportunity again this year at the end of the sermon to make this even more personal by coming forward to light a taper for the dearly departed souls in our own lives, and especially those who have been examples of faith for us.

But here is where we make the connection to ourselves. There is an aspect of the celebration of All Saints that makes it something like a mass funeral, and funerals can tend to make us into mere spectators if we're not careful, especially if we make the funeral to be only about the person who has died. A Christian funeral cannot be only about the deceased person. It has to be about their connection to Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism. But it also has to be about the baptismal connection of those who are left behind. In other words, Christian funerals need to be about the living just as much as they are about the dead, and about living now with hope and faith in the face of death. And that is true for our All-Saints' celebrations as well.

And that is just what our readings this morning are meant to help us with. What does it mean to live on this side of the grave as followers of Jesus? What does it mean to be redeemed as God's people, liberated from our captivity to sin and death to live the life God created us for? And what does it look like when we start to live into this blessed way of life? Well, it turns out not to be what our instinctive, common-sense, religious selves expect. Think about how the word "blessed" gets thrown around in casual conversation, or on social media posts these days. You are blessed when things are going your way, when you have lots of money that you can spend on yourself, when you have a nice house in a nice neighborhood, and can go on nice vacations that take you away from the cares of the world. You are blessed when people think of you as a good person, when you have a good reputation as an honored member of society. And you are blessed when you are happy and not sad or depressed. We even have "happy places" to retreat to when we're stressed out, and feel "blessed" to be able to do so.

There are a lot of ways in which our culture is different from the cultures of the ancient world, but this is not one of them. In this respect we are just like Jesus' first disciples whom he was addressing in today's Gospel reading. They too expected that to be blessed was to have things going their way. If you were prosperous, healthy, and happy, that meant God favored you, and also that you *deserved* God's blessing. The corollary to that was that if you were *not* prosperous or healthy, well then you must have done something to deserve your fate too. And don't we still have that instinct? You have heard people who experience good fortune say, "I must be living right." And haven't you heard people experiencing tragedy ask, "what did I do to deserve this?" Maybe you have said one or both of those things yourself.

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain here in Luke, like his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, flies in the face of this instinctual religious sense of ours. We are so used to this beloved text that we can easily miss just how counter-cultural it is. Jesus is saying that to be blessed is exactly the opposite of what we expect. Think about it for a second. Blessed are the *poor*? (I'll just quickly note that Matthew's version, the version most people tend to quote, says "blessed are the poor *in spirit*." That's a bit easier to take, isn't it? But Luke does not add that qualifier.) "Blessed are the poor," Jesus says here. Why on earth would the poor be blessed? Is it maybe because they recognized their need for God? Is it maybe because they have no illusion of control over their own life, unlike that rich man Jesus talks about later in Luke who planned to build bigger barns to store his windfall, and to eat, drink, and be merry, only to die that very night? I think that's exactly what Jesus is getting at here. And just to be clear that this is so, after four Beatitudes Jesus follows up with four "woes" that Matthew's version doesn't have. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Woe to you who are full and happy and well-respected. You have everything you need. You don't need to be consoled. You don't need to depend on anything, or anyone. Maybe not even God. That is the temptation that results from the bad theology Jesus is countering here. The theology of "blessed are the rich" that our culture believes so fervently (has anyone won the billion-dollar lottery yet? Did you buy a ticket? Don't tell me.) – that bad theology leads us to take God for granted when we have more than we need, and to avoid helping those who don't have what they need because we think that they deserve to be needy and that God wants it that way. They must be lazy, or immoral, or defective in some other way. You know the script.

Not so, says Jesus, as clear as a tolling bell. He is speaking to his disciples here, some of whom are apparently poor, hungry, grieving, and despised, and some of whom are rich, well-fed, happy, and well-respected. To all the saints, in other words, to the rich and the poor ones, Jesus says, "don't believe the hype." Don't trust the false god's your culture pushes on you. Jesus invites them instead to trust him, who is headed to the cross to flip our deadly script, to reconcile us with God and with one another, and to change our hearts and our attitudes to see that the poor belong in God's kingdom, and that they will be fed, consoled, and justified. This is good news for those poor disciples. But it is also good news for the rich ones, who in their change of heart reach out as agents of God's blessing, to be partners in feeding, consoling, and extoling them as God's beloved children, and their beloved siblings. They become willing to make sacrifices on their behalf, to mourn with them the plight of all the suffering, and to disavow the bad theology that so isolates them from others.

As we come forward now to remember the saints who have gone before us, who have touched our lives with their love and their trust in God's promises, may we be encouraged by their example to hear Jesus' blessings and woes in our own lives, so that our hearts too may be changed, and we may come to trust more boldly the promises of our own baptism. And as we do, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds too in Christ Jesus, unto live everlasting. Amen.