

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

All Saints Day, as you may know, is on November first, which was yesterday. But we celebrate it on the first Sunday in November. For early Christians, who trusted Jesus' promise of resurrection and everlasting life, the day of their death was a day to remember that promise and to celebrate. They thought of it as their birthday into heaven. This was at a time when actual birthday weren't celebrated, because most people simply didn't know their birthday. And that is why saints days on the church calendar are celebrated on the day they died. But the calendar filled up, and over time the church set aside a single day for remembering all the saints together, and they cleverly called it All Saints. But then along came medieval theology and the invention of purgatory as a place most people have to go on their way to heaven because they didn't live good enough lives on earth. So November 2 was set aside as All Souls Day, a day that commemorates the faithful departed who are not yet in heaven but are on their way. The Reformation removed this distinction, and we celebrate *all* of our blessed dead together. That's why we started with a Thanksgiving for Baptism this morning, and why we included in that a remembrance of all the saints. It's why today in our prayers we will bring that remembrance and celebration a little closer to home as we remember fellow members of Grace who have died in the past year. And it is why, right after the sermon we will have an opportunity 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.

So, our celebration of All Saints is something like a mass funeral. But funerals can tend to make us into mere spectators if we're not careful, especially if we make them to be only about the person who has died. A Christian funeral cannot be only about the deceased person and their life. It has to be about their connection to Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism. And 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, about living now, in this life, with faith, hope, and love in the face of death, and sin, and evil,

That is also what our All Saints celebration is about, and 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 good neighborhood, and can afford 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. 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 also 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*? 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 talked about 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,” what one of my pastor friends calls “Woe-itudes.” “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 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, well, you know, they deserve to be needy and 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 you and to me, to rich and poor alike, Jesus says, “don’t believe the hype.” Don’t trust the false gods your culture pushes on you. Jesus invites us 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 as 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.

How appropriate, then, as I wrote in my newsletter article, that we also celebrate today forty years of the Grace Food Pantry, four decades of caring for our neighbors in need in this community. And we do this at a time when the need has never been greater, when government assistance to the poor is under threat even without the government being shut down now for more than a month. Stick around after the service for our chili cookoff, which will be both a celebration and an opportunity joyfully to express our faith in continued and increased support of this homegrown ministry, to be partners and conduits of God’s blessing for others.

But first, as in preparation for continuing to live out our faith in the present, we come forward now to remember the saints who have gone before us, our blessed dead who have touched our lives with their love and their trust in God’s promises. May we be encouraged by their lives that we hold in our hearts to hear Jesus’ blessings and woes on 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 that, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.