

**All Saints Day**  
**Revelation 7:9-17 and Matthew 5:1-12**  
**November 6, 2011**

Have you noticed how elaborate Halloween decorations have become? Orange lights around the doorway, graveyards in the front lawn, pumpkins galore. Last week I was at my sister's house and I complimented her on her electric cobweb in the front window. "I love really doing up Halloween," she said "namely because Halloween kicks off the whole holiday season. It is just one set of decorations after another all the way through New Year's." She's right. The holiday season is right in front of us: Christmas catalogs are arriving in our mailboxes, radio stations have begun advertising when their all holiday music is set to start. Before Thanksgiving gets here, we'll be awash in holiday good cheer.

The church, however, lives on a different calendar. The church has a different way of marking time. While typically we conceive of time in a line – time marches on, the present becomes the past, what was once the beginning becomes what is now the end – the church takes the beginning and the end and ties them together into one big circle, proclaiming that with every beginning is an ending, and with every ending is a new beginning. We are not destined to simply repeat the same holidays each year but to be pulled into the great redemptive circle of God's time, where everything has its place, its meaning and its hope. In the circle that is the church year, we are also near the very end, three weeks from the end to be exact, and it is the day to remember the dead. That is a stark way of putting it, I know. It is easier to say we celebrate the saints today; those who lived and loved God, who sing in eternal glory before the throne. And that is true. But as I once heard in a children's story, when the question 'what do you have to do to be a saint?' was answered by a little boy said 'you gotta be dead,' beneath glorious confession of those who fought of old and won the victor's crown of gold is the harsh reality of death. The early church began the custom of remembering all those who had been martyred on a single day each year early in Christian history; because so many people had died amid brutal persecutions that the church knew they risked losing their names. Without a remembrance, too many lives might be forgotten. If we are honest, what we bring before the throne of God today is our own roll call of those we have lost; loved ones who died years ago but whose absence still causes us pain. Around us is the great march to Christmas, and we sit here and think about death.

And the text we are given to think about death is the Beatitudes. Of all texts. "Jesus began to teach them, saying blessed are the..." and the words fall like a thud in our midst. Once in a Bible study, I had a person say "I do not get the point of the Beatitudes. Is Jesus really saying happy are those who mourn? I get the great reversal of God's kingdom but do any of us actually act like this?" Her words reflect our basic framework for understanding these sayings. We hear them as commands, go and do this. "Blessed are the meek," reads the lay reader and we think, "I ought to live with more humility." "Blessed are the peacemakers," continues the reader and we sink farther down in our seats, remembering our heated words of yesterday. Like the Ten Commandments, we hear them in the imperative – Do this – and your reward will be blessing. And for as much as we might seek to follow Jesus, we know that our lives confess not blessed are the poor in spirit, but blessed are the self-reliant, blessed are the bold not the meek, the proactive and ambitious not those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. What are the Beatitudes, really? I just don't get the point.

The key to Jesus' words comes in our understanding of the word blessed. In Greek, the word blessed – markarios – is translated happy, fortunate, or favored. Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Of these choices, favored is the most apt word, and not just favored but favored by God. God's favor be upon those who mourn, for they will be comforted. It is the same kind of favored contained in the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary, "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you." We know all about the blessings and the challenges contained in the favor about to be bestowed on Mary. If we take that favor and reach way back into Hebrew psalm, we'll discover the multiple times those ancient prayers confess, "Blessed are the ones who follow the Law of the Lord..." Here, blessing, one scholar suggests, means in its literal sense "to find the right road." You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit, when you know your life depends on God. So Jesus says, "God's favor be upon you, who are merciful, - the divine favor of risk, danger, love and heartache – because you are on the right road." And if I can add one last piece of our word study, that Greek word for blessed – makarios – contains the word karios, God's time. Favored are you because in your mercifulness, your meekness, and in your mourning you've entered into God's time, into God's great circle of redemption.

Jesus spoke these words on a mountain; speaking intimately to his disciples. But the crowds – that ever-present multitude of persons – were also present, hovering in the background. While he is describing the right way to God to that smaller group of dedicated followers, I imagine that Jesus' eyes are on the crowds, the hurting, lost, anxious, hopeless people who eye him again and again to say 'are you the one who will lead us to God?' So Jesus looks at poor widows, defenseless without income or shelter and says blessed are you who mourn, because you will be comforted. Jesus looks at the persons ragged and weary, who have never once had the power of self-determination and says blessed are the meek, they will one day inherit the earth. Jesus looks at the ones who are hungry, just plain hungry, and says blessed are you, for you will be filled.

Now whether we believe these words or not depends upon how much we believe in Jesus. The Beatitudes are not commands, they are prophetic sayings said by the one who is the one we are looking for. In Jesus' utterance of these truths lives the power to make them true. Jesus looks at our grieving, greedy hearts and says blessed are those who are in pure in heart, and there a new thing is born; Jesus brings into being exactly what he declares. When we seek God's road we find that happening. Not that we are happy, but that we are on the right road, able to see what God is doing among us.

There is a church in California, who struggled with a host of homeless, hungry people who camped outside their doors. One year, they decided rather than to ask them to leave to feed them. They opened a food pantry. Once a week, they opened a little window in a side door and handed out bags of food. One week it was raining, truly pouring very hard. When they saw the long line outside the side door, they couldn't make them wait outside in such a downpour. So they let the people inside and found that some people were so hungry that they took their bags, found a corner in the room and sat down to eat. On that day, the food pantry turned into a full meal, served hot and ready to eat. The volunteers, who staffed the meal, over many, many weeks of serving food, began to feel uncomfortable about their practice of serving their guests first and then eating themselves later. That was a two-tiered, separated table, they thought. So one day, they filled their own plates alongside the other guests and sat down to eat all together. One of the volunteers looked up at the room filled with people – all kinds of people – all eating together and

he thought, "Ah, this is the table of God." They were on the right road, and then, ah, there was God.

Or I think of my friend Alison, whose mother is dying even as we speak. The cancer Betty had as a young woman returned two years ago, growing too fast, reaching all the way to the brain. What was once an active, vibrant woman is now reduced to skin and bones, unable to leave her bed or even to speak. It doesn't matter, though. She is still a beloved mother, wife and friend. And the family is supported by that amazing web of countless meals, cards, visits, and prayers. As I sat by her bedside, hold Betty's hand and watching Alison stroke her mother's almost gone hair, I found that even amid our tears, ah, there was God. Blessed are the grieving, for in God and God's family, you will find comfort.

The saints are the ones who, by the grace of God, know this. They know the blessings Jesus announces are not rewards, token for good behavior, but moments in which they catch a glimpse of God. Blessings are ways in which God allows us to see God, and with such a view of God, to have our grief comforted, our anxieties quelled, all of questions of the future filled by the one who is our future, and always our true home. So on this day when we remember the dead, those who are alive in ceaseless praise to God, and we look at our own lives in light of our own deaths one day, we are blessed by the promise of God's presence, who favors us with risky life and says, "Come on, come find your place along the right road of God, for God is here and God's kingdom is coming."