

Today is all Saints Sunday; we remember the saints that have gone before us this past year, the new saints that God has claimed through baptism, and all the saints throughout history and around the world. There is indeed a great cloud of witnesses.

In baptism God reaches down and claims us for Sainthood. It's nothing that we do; it's all about God taking that first step. We can't earn it, we don't deserve it, we can't choose it, and with the word and in that very ordinary water, God chooses us and makes promises.

God promises to forgive our sins, to love us, to give us Eternal life, and to be part of that community we call the body of Christ. And all together, with all the Saints throughout history, with all the saints of today and in the future, we are all connected in the Kingdom of God. We all belong to one another... We are all different from one another, and yet Christ is the unity amidst our diversity. Pretty amazing stuff...

We have a challenging Gospel lesson this morning, we hear about Blessings and Woes. "Blessed are the poor, blessed are you who are hungry, blessed are you when people hate you... Woe to those who are rich, woe to those who are full, woe to those who are laughing..." If I was to sum this up, I'd say-- Blessed are you who are suffering, and woe to you that are comfortable.

These words seem like the exact opposite of common sense... And Jesus does this all the time, we find this topsy-turvy vision everywhere... It's in the parables; the healings; the ministry... Jesus constantly challenges our ideas of righteousness; Jesus seems to love turning the tables on us!

In a sermon recently, I talked about how Luke often uses geography to describe spiritual landscapes... And here we have another. Before our gospel reading starts, the writer of Luke makes a point of saying that Jesus came and stood on a “level place.”

Another name for our gospel reading is the sermon on the plain. As opposed to Matthew’s version which we all know so well, as the Sermon on the Mount.

In Luke’s version, there is a very significant reason he situates Jesus on a level place... He’s emphasizing a theme, a prophetic vision of the leveling of all humanity. It’s a theme that Luke hits hard and often.

In very first chapter of Luke, even before Jesus is born, Mary visits Elizabeth, and we hear the magnificat, which we sing in the Holden evening prayer services in Lent... “You have cast the mighty down from their thrones, and uplifted the humble of heart, You have filled the hungry with wondrous things and left the wealthy no part...” It’s a vision of a great leveling throughout human community...

And again, in chapter three we have John the Baptist, quoting the Prophet Isaiah and proclaiming, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level...”

And now, in chapter six we have Jesus first teaching, which is essentially his mission statement, and he is on a level place... And we hear again, the continuation of the prophetic vision announced by Isaiah, sung by Mary and proclaimed by John the Baptist... Essentially, Blessings to those of you in the valley and woe to you on top of the mountain...

This leveling is the integrating of all things... And when you think about it, we are constantly integrating our blessings and woes... Aren't we? It's where we live every day.

We all know what it means to have our stomachs full and our souls hungry... We all know what it means to be poor, and yet be rich with friends or vice versa. During a funeral, we all know what it means to laugh at a funny memory, and then cry when we remember our friend has passed... We are constantly integrating blessings and woes...

This leveling is good news for all of us, because it's not only where we live, it makes us one with one another...

In our Lutheran tradition we call something what it is. Blessings and woes happen... We have always been theologians of the cross; it's our heritage. We know the spiritual life involves and addresses suffering. Suffering may be the great leveler of all... Death certainly is...

We certainly don't go looking for woes or suffering and personally I go to great lengths to avoid it. But I'll tell you, it certainly finds us. It comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Sometimes it's illness, or being bullied, or being fired, or divorce, or death of a loved one. Or a job we hate... Sometimes it's in the jealousies... Suffering is all around us.

As much as we'd all like to avoid the suffering of this world, we can't. To live and to breathe means we will encounter suffering, some woes, some time in our life.

And here's the mystery, for as much as we dislike suffering-- somehow, suffering brings change and transformation. I can't explain it, but for those who have endured great suffering, they are often more empathetic, gracious, understanding, loving, more generous...

And this fits a spiritual pattern we see so often in the bible... The path to eternal life goes through death. The path to forgiveness goes through confession. The path to righteousness goes through sin. The path to the Kingdom of God goes through loving our enemies...

Do you see the cross-shaped pattern in all this? And the good news is that suffering never gets the last word! Our God redeems suffering and brings wholeness...

And again, this is not "hocus-pocus" magical thinking; this is truth and universal... The Jesus shaped life trusts that when we encounter suffering; we will ultimately be blessed. This is like resurrection, its counter intuitive, and it is the truth. Quick story... A few years back I was leading a bible study, and we were talking about this gospel lesson, specifically that part about loving the enemy. We talked about praying for people we don't like. That's a hard thing to do...

But when we try it, we talked about how our prayers change... from initially disliking someone and praying that God will curse them-- to hoping the other

person will change-- to finally praying that God would change us—it's a progression. We talked about how we hear ourselves in conversation with God... and how that changes our hearts and the very way of seeing others...

At one point in the bible study, a participant said, "I think that's what happens when we get older." And the others sitting around the table all agreed. I was a little surprised, I wasn't expecting that reaction.

Another person said, "I used to really dislike some people, but that's not how it is anymore." I appreciated that wisdom! As we bear that cross of aging, that cross of suffering-- miracles happen... leveling happens... wholeness comes...

As Christians in this body of Christ, we are all different from one another. Some of us are Republicans and Democrats and Independents...

Though many of us may disagree with each other about a whole host of things, we are also commanded to love one another. We should be praying for each other... And that makes us different than the rest of the world, we pray for people who we disagree with! And change happens!

We are a congregation of Saints and sinners. Today is all Saints Sunday, we honor the Saints who have gone before us, and those newly baptized.

And in honor of all the Saints; let's remember to be loving, kind, compassionate, and gracious. Because we are different, and in our differences, God brings us leveling... God brings us healing, wholeness and more, and for the sake of the world...

Amen...