

November 1, 2020

I love our scripture readings for today. I love the Revelations text, where God will wipe away every tear from our eye. It's so personal and tender... And I've always loved the Sermon on the Mount! It all about being blessed, even and especially in the midst of suffering and persecution...

Today is all Saints Sunday; we remember the saints that have gone before us, 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.

And all together, we are connected in the Kingdom of God. This is what we celebrate today! You have been chosen by God, you are a Saint, and you are a part of this miraculous community! A community of blessing...

Today, I'd like to do a little reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount, and the beatitudes, the blessings. "Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..."

This are challenging words because they are the opposite of how we typically think of blessing. How can it be that people who are mourning, are blessed? It seems to me that they are feeling sad and grieving, feeling deeply alone... Blessed? Really? Hummm... Let's talk about it...

Jesus does this a lot. We find this topsy-turvy vision everywhere... It's in the parables; the healings; the ministry... Jesus constantly challenges our ideas of what constitutes righteousness and blessing...

So, why does Jesus say these things? Why are the poor in Spirit blessed? Why are those who mourn, blessed?

Lutherans have always been theologians of the cross; it's our tradition and heritage. When Jesus says pick up your cross and follow me, we know the spiritual life involves and addresses suffering.

Believe me, we certainly don't go looking for suffering, but I'll tell you, suffering certainly finds us. It comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Sometimes it's a pandemic, sometimes it's called Covid 19, sometimes it's in the conflicts over school and churches reopening... Sometimes it's in the conflicts over elections... Sometimes it's cancer, or heart disease, or mental illness, or depression, or a lost job, or a divorce, or death of a loved one.

As much as we'd all like to end all the suffering of this world, we can't. To live and to breathe means we will encounter some suffering, some time in our lives, we will all encounter a cross of sorts.

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

And this fits a spiritual pattern, we see in scripture that is fundamentally counter-intuitive. The spiritual path to eternal life goes through death. The spiritual path to forgiveness goes through confession. The spiritual path to the Kingdom of God goes through loving our enemies... Do you see the cross-shaped pattern in all this?

The Jesus shaped life trusts that when we encounter suffering; and we will, we will ultimately be blessed. It's like resurrection, its counter intuitive, but it is the truth.

One of the blessings of being part of a community of Saints is that we never journey alone through life. We listen to each other's experiences, we hold each other's hands, we pray together, we share our pain and our suffering together, and we worship a God who knows from a human perspective what pain and suffering is all about. And as we suffer, God suffers with us.

Quick story... For twelve and a half years when I was in Austin, I gathered with a small group every Tuesday morning to say prayers. Two of the participants were a couple, Bill and Dorothy.

I always appreciated Bill's prayers. He always started each prayer with a verse from psalm 118, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." I will always remember his gentle spirit and his genuine joy of just being together... together in prayer.

Bill prayed from his heart. He had a capacity to see the good in people and he cared deeply about others.

We had Bill's funeral about five years ago. But before he passed away, I went to visit him and his wife. Bill was sitting in his chair. We shared communion; I said some prayers. And Bill prayed too, perhaps the most moving prayers I have ever heard.

He poured out his heart about his love for Dorothy. Through tears and hugs, I thought of that reading from First Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things... endures all things... Love never ends." It is so true.

In the midst of pain and suffering, God came to Bill and transformed the circumstances into a proclamation of love. I can't explain it, it's a mystery. Believe me, it's God's miracle.

Suffering and death is real and around us all the time... And yet, we are people of the resurrection. We speak the truth, we love one another, we trust in God's love and mercy, and suffering never gets the last word! God works miracles in and through us all the time!

We are a congregation of Saints and sinners. We are all fellow workers in this Kingdom of God. Today we recognize Saints, those who have gone before us, and those newly baptized. And today, we celebrate that each and every single one of us is also a miracle from God; we are all Saints, we are all listed in that book of life... And thanks be to God... Amen...