

“You Are Someone’s Saint!”

The people in Matthew’s gospel expected a lot from Jesus, and who could blame them? Right at the outset, Matthew tells them that Jesus is “the Messiah” (1:1, NRSV), and so they’re expecting him to be a powerful political and military leader. And then, Matthew provides us with the genealogy of Jesus, in which we learn that Jesus is descended from both King David *and* Abraham. In other words, Jesus has an excellent pedigree. Immediately following his birth, exotic visitors from the East come to pay homage to the newborn “king of the Jews” (2:2). Years later, when Jesus is about to begin his public ministry, Matthew has the great John the Baptist introducing Jesus as “one more powerful than I ... who will baptize ... with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:11). And then, as Jesus prepares to deliver his first sermon, Matthew describes how, like Moses ascending Mt. Sinai, Jesus ascends another mountain and, in the tradition of all great rabbis, he sits before the people, and opens his mouth to speak. What will he say? All eyes are on him, and everyone is listening.

It’s probably safe to say, that what he said wasn’t what the people were expecting. What came out of his mouth is what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount, and it begins with what we heard this morning, the Beatitudes. It would be harder to find a more familiar passage of scripture than the Beatitudes, and we read it every year for All Saints Day. But I’m going to make a confession: I wasn’t always crazy about the Beatitudes. I mean, if you don’t listen to them too carefully, they sound lovely. But if you really pay attention to what’s being said, it sounds a little nuts.

For example, in our gospel reading, the first few Beatitudes begins like this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” and, “Blessed are those who mourn,” and, “Blessed are the meek.” Some of the newer translations substitute “happy” for “blessed,” and think that’s better. But I don’t care whether you use “blessed” or “happy,” because, to me, “poor in spirit” and “those who mourn” and “the meek” sounds like just the opposite of either “blessed” or “happy.”

Now, I know that each Beatitude has a second part that’s supposed to explain why that particular group of people is supposed to be “blessed” or “happy,” but do things really add up? Does the promise of a reward, at some undisclosed time in the future, really sound satisfying if, right now, I’m mourning, or being persecuted? I

don't think so! So, if we're to take Jesus seriously, we've got to do a little digging, because I think something else is going on.

I recently read an interesting article on the Sermon on the Mount, in which the author suggests that, when Matthew was assembling the material that would comprise that famous Sermon, he used Psalm 1 as a template. For example, just as Psalm 1 begins with the word "blessed," so does the Sermon on the Mount. And, just as Psalm 1 ends with a parable, so does the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, if Psalm 1 is a template for the Sermon on the Mount, then we should be able to read and interpret the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, through the lens of Psalm 1. And we can!

The article's author translates the beginning of Psalm 1 in this way: "Blessed is the one who walks not in the way of the wicked but in the way of the Lord" (1:1). The Hebrew word translated as "blessed," literally means "to find the right road." Therefore, a literal translation of this passage would probably read, "You are on the right road when you walk not in the way of unrighteousness but in the way of the Law of God." I think that makes a lot better sense, don't you? So, let's try interpreting the first Beatitude through the lens of Psalm 1. Instead of Jesus saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," what he literally means is "You're on the right road even if you're poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is yours." And if I were feeling poor in spirit and Jesus said this to me, I would probably respond by saying, "Thank you. That's nice to know."

Now, if you're still not convinced, think about the wider culture to which Jesus is talking. It's a culture that celebrated power, wealth, and success, because they thought these were God's rewards for a righteous life. But the people who were poor and destitute, they believed were being punished by God. These people were being given the message that God had turned his back on them.

Think about the ministry of Jesus: he always reached out to the poor and destitute. That is, he was always reaching out to people thought God had abandoned them. And so, when Matthew has Jesus delivering his first sermon – and it's a sermon delivered to the poor, and the destitute, and the outcast – the first words out of his mouth are something to the effect of this:

Even though you've been told the exact opposite, I'm here to say to you that, even though you feel helpless, and even

though you mourn, you are on the right road. You are on God's road because God has a special place in his heart for people just like you.

In other words, the Beatitudes serve the purpose of telling people who think they're worth nothing — because that's what they've been told all along — that they're actually worth everything to God. This is what we get when we read the Beatitudes through the lens of Psalm 1. Now, they're actually starting to sound like good news.

Now, you may be wondering what any of this has to do with All Saints Day, and I'll tell you. For a very long time, three people have always been at the top of my personal list of saints. And the thing is, I doubt if any of them ever thought of themselves as being saints. And two of them could very easily have thought that God had abandoned them. But, for me, they were saints.

Gene was something of an outsider. He was different. But when we met, I was feeling the same about myself, and so we naturally hit it off. We met at youth group, and were good friends through high school and college. After college, I moved away and lost touch with Gene. When I got word that Gene had committed suicide, I went to the funeral, and tried to figure out what had happened. Apparently, Gene was gay and he decided to come out of the closet. Apparently that news was not welcomed by either his family or church. And when it turns out that the people who are supposed to love and accept you don't, well, I guess Gene didn't think he had any other option. And so, Gene is one of my saints because he reminds me that, just as God's love knows no bounds, neither should ours.

Becky was an insider, but she probably didn't think of herself in that way. She was a talented musician, singer, and dancer. She had a kind heart and gentle spirit, and she was very attractive to boot. I met her at the Bible study I attended in college. She met and fell in love with a hapless young man who joined our study, and they married and moved away. What none of us knew was that the man she married had some significant psychological problems and, one day, he took her life. And Becky is one of my saints because she reminds me that, sometimes, unconditional love entails risks.

Finally, there is Kay. I really didn't know her all that well. She was a member of a large youth group that I led when I was living in Dallas. What I remember most about her was her smile: it could light up a room! I didn't know her parents, because

they didn't come to church, but Kay came with a friend, and she took to it like a fish to water. And so, when I got a phone call, informing me that Kay had committed suicide, I really couldn't believe it. I snooped around as best I could, and the information that had most traction was that Kay was the victim of ongoing molestation. And, apparently for Kay, death was the only avenue of escape. And Kay is one of my saints because she reminds me that, sometimes people are suffering without letting us know about it, and therefore we need to take care with all people.

So, where does all this leave us? Well, the Beatitudes in our gospel reading remind us that Jesus was telling people who didn't think they mattered to God that, in fact, they mattered very much to him. That's a message we can stand to hear even today. And I told you about Gene, Becky, and Kay, my saints, because I believe they are examples of people who never thought of themselves as being saints to anyone, and yet I probably think of them at least once per week, and through them God occasionally teaches me something new. And though their lives were short, they live long in my memory.

And that brings me to say this: Each one of you is a saint for somebody else. Each one of you has been noticed by someone. And though you might never have known it, each one of you — through something you've said, or something you've done — has been used by God to inspire, encourage, inform, or bless someone else. I know that most of you will not believe what I am saying because we've all been raised to believe that the saints are paragons of virtue and stalwarts of faith — people like St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But you can take this to the bank: On another day, in another church, in another year, your name will appear on a list of people being especially remembered. Because you will have made a difference in someone's life.