

## Feast of All the Saints

### Mt 5.1-12

When I worked in higher education, I used to hear a lot about the “real world.” Teachers were routinely encouraged to make sure their courses prepared students for the “real world.” Administrators were encouraged to make sure each program included opportunities for “real world” learning alongside classroom instruction. Even the students got in on the game: it was not unusual for teachers to hear, “I’m not interested in all that theoretical stuff; give me something I can use in the real world.”

We even talked about the “real world” at seminary; in fact, we talked *a lot* about the “real world” at seminary. Bishops would say, “We don’t need priests who were formed in some ivory tower; we need priests who are ready for ministry in the real world.” Students would say, “This course isn’t relevant; the people in the pews don’t care about church history or systematic theology or liturgics. They have to live in the real world, and we need to be ready to minister to their real-world needs. Give me something I can use.”

So we spent a lot of time talking about the real world, and—perhaps not surprisingly—we found that reasonable people disagree on what counts as “real.” Where do we draw the line between “theory” and “practice”? How do we distinguish what’s “relevant” from what’s “useless”? How do we determine the “real” needs of the church or of the world?

I was reminded of these conversations while preparing for this sermon because the words Jesus speaks to us this day seem so clearly unreal. It’s not hard for me to imagine one of the disciples speaking up and saying, “Rabbi, that’s all well and good, but it’s not real. It sounds nice, but it’s not possible to live that way. And besides, who really *wants* to live that way? Mourning and persecution don’t sound like much fun. Give us something more relevant.”

The words Jesus speaks to us today have a way of forcing us to rethink our assumptions about what’s real, because the world Jesus describes does not seem to be the world we live in. And, if we’re honest, the life he commends to us is not the life most of us seek to live.

“Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who are persecuted.” That doesn’t sound like reality. Yes, mourning is real, loss and sorrow are real, persecution is real, but more often than not we don’t think of these as blessings. We do our best to stay as far away from those things as we can; sometimes we even go so far as to pretend they don’t exist.

In order for us to understand the kind of life Jesus describes—and, even more importantly, in order for us to *experience* the kind of blessedness he describes—we have to rethink what’s real. We have to consider the possibility that the way we *think* the world works may actually be less real than the way Jesus *tells us* the world works.

Of course, the reason the words of Jesus sound so very unrealistic is because more often we are told the opposite. Blessed are the charismatic and the confident, blessed are the self-possessed

masters of their destinies. Blessed are those who are happy. Blessed are those who stand up for their rights. Blessed are those who know how to take care of themselves and who treat others only as they deserve to be treated. Blessed are those who don't take their piety too far. Blessed are those about whom everyone speaks well and who are respected by all. That's the message, isn't it? And not only are we *told* this, we *act* in ways that testify to our belief that *this* is the way the world really works.

Sure, we hear about humility and reconciliation and peace—we hear about faith, hope, and love—but at the end of the day we understand our lives as a constant negotiation between what we perceive to be lofty, unrealistic ideals and life as it “really” is, life in the trenches. At the end of the day, we hear the words of Jesus as something to which we might someday aspire, but not as a reliable account of how we ought to think of our everyday lives.

But if the way we think the world works is less real when compared to the way Jesus tells us the world *really* works, what are we to do? How are we to see the words of Jesus as a better, more accurate description of the way things really are? What's the secret that enables us to experience the kind of blessedness he describes, a blessedness that comes to us in the midst of poverty, in the midst of loss, in the midst of shame, in the midst of brokenness?

The reality at the heart of the Beatitudes is love; not affection, not emotion, but love. Those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn because of the brokenness of this world, those who are meek—they are those who have learned to live in the vulnerability that is a consequence of love.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who practice mercy, those who have learned to abide in holiness and righteousness—they are those who are determined to allow nothing other than love to guide their actions.

Those who practice reconciliation, those who strive for the restoration of all things, those willing even to be victimized by others who live in fear of love—they are those who have learned that reality itself—the really real world—is grounded in the love of God.

They have learned that the love of God is greater than life or death, greater than things present and things to come, greater than rulers or powers, greater than height or depth or anything else in all creation (Rom 8.38-39). Those who truly love have learned that the love of God will not let them go. They are those who know what it is to experience blessedness in the midst of brokenness.

One of the best commentaries on the Beatitudes is the exposition of love St. Paul gives in his first letter to the Corinthians. “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor 13.4-8).

Today, of course, we celebrate the feast of all the saints. This observance tells us two things about the reality and the power of love. The first thing it tells us is that those who are saints are those whose lives are guided by love. Those who live in vulnerability, those who mourn for the

brokenness of the world but are not overwhelmed by sorrow, those who allow their actions to be guided by mercy, by righteousness, and by hope—they are those who are the saints.

But the celebration of the feast of all the saints is not just a commemoration of particular individuals; it's a celebration of the community to which these individuals belong. It's a celebration of a fellowship that is governed by mercy, by reconciliation, and by righteousness because it is governed by the mercy, the grace, and the power of God.

We come here today not just to remember saints who have gone before or to give thanks for the saints still in our midst or who will follow us. We come here today to learn what it means to live ourselves as members of the communion of those whose lives are ordered by the vulnerability, the tenacity, and the hopefulness of love. By being here today, we are saying we too aspire to be saints.

We come here today to give thanks to God for not only surrounding us with the great cloud of witnesses that are the saints, but to pray for the mercy and the strength to run with patience the race that is set before *us*, so that, together with all those whose lives are governed by love, we may receive a crown of glory and thereby bring honor and praise to the One who sustains us all with his love, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.