

Characteristics of Saints

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is All Saints Day. It's a time of commemoration as we pause to remember the saints who have died in our lives. I also think that All Saints Day is a time for us to reflect on what being a saint means for us.

As I thought and prayed about the texts for today I couldn't help being pulled towards our epistle and gospel lessons. The epistle lesson intrigued me because God sets us apart for his purposes as children of God. To be a saint is to be a child of God.

We often hear the phrase Child of God when a baptism occurs. God claims in the waters of baptism. We are made children of God and inheritors of God's kingdom. We are set apart to live our lives for God as his children.

We are all saints. Our epistle lesson also points out that the world does not know us because it doesn't know God. The world values different things than God. The world values things like wealth, power, and popularity.

God's viewpoint challenges the world view – the world in which we live, which leads me to the gospel text for today.

In today's gospel text, Jesus turns our way of thinking upside down. Individuals who we might think of as outcasts and not worth much in our society are those that Jesus' blesses in the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are arranged into two groups. The first group is four beatitudes critiquing the world. Jesus' words make us think about economic, political, religious, and other personal distress that results from the actions of the powerful elite.

Just a few words about Roman society...what Rome decreed everyone needed to follow. The powerful elite held all of the cards. Many people were oppressed and forgotten. Peace in Rome's view was order, not a peace of living in relationship with God and with each other.

In the first group of beatitudes, Jesus blesses the poor in spirit. These weren't people who were only living in poverty. The poor in spirit are people who have been crushed and have no hope.

Jesus blesses those who mourn next. We might think that those who are mourning might be mourning the loss of someone or something they loved. Warren Carter

suggests that those who mourn “do not lament their own sins, but ...they mourn or lament the destructive impact of imperial powers....They mourn the misrule of God’s world by the devil’s agents.” Those that mourn are grieving the oppression they are suffering.

Blessed are the meek are Jesus’ next words. We might think of someone who is meek to be a wimp or someone who is passive. The meek are those who are humiliated and trust God to save them from their current suffering.

The last beatitude in the first group refers to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. People may in fact be hungry and thirsty, but the point is that this group of people longs for God’s justice so that they might have the things that they need to survive.

In these first four beatitudes, people who are suffering are blessed. Each blessing is ended with a promise that God will do something for them.

The remaining four Beatitudes lift up one's behavior in response to God's reign. These last four Beatitudes point out positive actions on behalf of one's neighbor.

Blessed are the merciful. God's reign is one that is full of second chances. God is merciful to us time and time again. Being merciful is life-giving and transformative.

The pure in heart are those who show mercy, justice, and don't know hypocrisy. God's kingdom rules in their hearts.

Blessed are the peacemakers. The peacemakers are people who seek God's will for the earth. The peacemaker sets out to work for people to be in equitable relationships with each other and to recognize and live in relationship with God.

Finally, blessed are those who are persecuted for justice's sake. Those that stand up to the dominant culture and are ridiculed for God's work will be rewarded.

After a snapshot of the beatitudes, how does this relate to being a saint? As children of God, we are saints, called do to God's work in the world. The beatitudes are a reminder for us that we live in the world, but are not of the world. We need to live our lives according to God's purposes, not what the dominant culture would have us do.

Learning from the beatitudes we are called to help those who are crushed in spirit, who are alienated and forgotten, and who fight for basic survival. The beatitudes remind us to be merciful. Do forgive someone who has hurt us instead of holding a grudge against them.

We are also reminded to seek the good in everyone and to build up relationships instead of tearing them down with hurtful words, gossip, and personal attacks. We

are called to speak out against injustice and do something about it. For example, we can speak to our commissioners about homelessness in Calvert County in conjunction with other churches to provide a safe and warm place for our homeless brothers and sisters to sleep.

It's easy to say all of these things and to think that we will do them.

I often think that I'm not a saint because I can't do enough. I'm not like Mother Teresa who gave her entire life to helping the poor and the oppressed. I often get discouraged and think that I can't do what God asks of me. But when I read the beatitudes I'm reminded that God is there in each and every action I take regardless of how big or small something is.

We are all saints, from the least to the greatest.

I'm reminded of a story that Bill Yonkers shared at a Youth Quake Event in Baltimore about a saint. Bill talked about driving in a city where the homeless only had a few places where they could sleep without being arrested. He talked about driving past one of these areas where he saw a woman waking up all of the homeless that were sleeping in this one area. He shared that he pulled over and watched this woman perform what seemed to be a ritual. This homeless woman was checking on her friends to make sure they made it through the cold night. She gave each of them a hug as they woke up, valuing their existence. Bill shared with the youth that it made him reflect on what being a child of God meant. He realized that as he was driving by in his warm car and there were people that he forgot about.

God blesses the poor and the oppressed and asks us to be merciful, to seek justice and peace, and to put God's love in our hearts and share it with others.

We are all saints, called by God to do his work. Even though there may be times when we are discouraged or threatened, God is with us.

Warren Carter comments that, “Disciples...live in but at odds with their dominant culture. Yet they cannot retreat from it because they have a God-given mission to it and in it.”

We have a God-given mission in this world. We are saints, set apart by God to do his work.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding be in your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus the Lord. Amen.