

You are Blessed¹

The Feast of All Saints, Matthew 5:1-12

Grace Church Newton

November 5, 2023

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Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

Who here sometimes feels “poor in spirit”? Saddened by what you see happening in the world around us? Whose spirit is a bit down these days?

You are blessed! I bless you!

Who here grieves and – perhaps today more than other days, with the memory of our loved ones at the forefront of our minds – who has mourned?

You who mourn, you are blessed! I bless you!

Do you sometimes look around you and struggle to see how you could ever have an impact on people and policies and important societal outcomes?

You are among the meek, and you are blessed! I bless you!

And you, you who have you shown grace and gentleness to those around you?

You are blessed!

You who seek common ground; who experience moments of awe and insight beyond this material world; you who take risks to voice God’s desire for justice and peace...you are the peacemakers, the pure in heart, the persecuted, and you are blessed!

It’s eye-opening, isn’t it? Or perhaps better put, it is *heart*-opening, to read the beatitudes, the blessings in this way. And I am indebted to the Rev. Richard Burden for opening *my* heart to this passage in this way. My typical response when reading a passage like this – and perhaps yours, too – is more to think, “If only I could be more like those people Jesus is

¹ With gratitude for the inspiration for this sermon to the Rev. Dr. Richard Burden, Rector, All Saints Parish.

describing. If only I could be more merciful, more pure in heart. If only I could be meek, or a peacemaker. If only I had more courage to stand up for what is right...*then* I could be blessed like the people Jesus is talking about.” I can fall into the trap of reading this passage as a call to be more than I am. To be more than I could ever possibly be.

But what if instead of hearing these words as an indictment of our shortcomings...what if we read this litany of blessings not as a conditional statement – if you were to able do these things then you would be blessed – as a statement of fact – you are human, of course you mourn, of course you hunger for righteousness, of course you show mercy – and YOU ARE BLESSED.

John O’Donohue, the Irish poet, theologian, and former Roman Catholic priest, has a few things to say about blessing. In his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, O’Donohue relates blessing to kindness. As an aside, O’Donohue, at least in this work, avoids the use of what he refers to as “God language.” I think he describes it as sucking all the oxygen out of the room. So when he uses a word like “kindness,” or “wholeness,” when he describes reaching toward “the source,” we might think of that as more precise language for how he sees God move in the world. He writes this:

“There is a kindness that dwells deep down in things; it presides everywhere, often in the places we least expect. The world can be harsh and negative, but if we remain generous and patient, kindness inevitably reveals itself...something instinctive in us expects it, and once we sense it we are able to trust and open ourselves” [[Source](#), 185].

“What is a blessing?” then, O’Donohue asks. In his imagination, a blessing is “a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen.” He continues: “To be in the world is to be distant from the homeland of wholeness...When we bless, we are enabled somehow to go beyond our present frontiers and reach into the source.” When we bless, we “awaken[s] future wholeness” [198].

Today we commemorate the Feast of All Saints. This time of year – marked both in the natural world around us and in the rituals and practices that have emerged over centuries to help us observe and experience this time – this time of the year feels ripe for blessing, for reaching toward wholeness, for glimpsing what lies beyond our present frontiers.

We don’t know what lies on the other side of what O’Donohue and his Celtic compatriots would call ‘the thin veil.’ At least I don’t. But I love imagining that Monica, mother of St.

Augustine, and the patron saint of mothers of difficult children – I love imagining that Monica is in my cloud of witnesses. I love imagining that somehow I may be able to sense the spirit of Julian of Norwich reminding me that “all shall be well.” I love thinking that my Grandmother Georgia is somehow mysteriously connected with me when I settle onto my prayer cushion in the morning. I love knowing – being reminded – that we are blessed in a deep and abiding way by the people who have gone before us.

This time of year brings that out for me. In these days we can somehow experience the fullness of time, the breadth and depth of feeling that seems more possible at this time of year. Our grief and mourning – that we here today place front and center – they open us to deeper relationship with each other, they connect us to O’Donohue’s “source.” Our sense of smallness in contrast to the scale of nature as it shows forth its glory, our feelings of inadequacy in the face of humanity’s struggles...these experiences open us up to Awe. In this moment, we are blessed by being brought face-to-face with Depth and Meaning and Eternity.

And so this time of year...this is also a time of year to remember that we bless each other. We can draw a circle of light around those we encounter. We can walk through this world helping people experience that the blessing Jesus promises isn’t something we stand on the outside of, have to perform in some way to earn or deserve or merit. We are blessed.

Amen.