

It's the Geography That Matters

All Saints

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Texts: Joshua 3.7-17;
Psalm 107;
I John 3.1-13;
Matthew 5.1-12

I'm not a big fan of the concept of saints as a category. I guess I am a good Protestant that way. First of all, it is based in a practice that Jesus condemns a hundred times over throughout the gospels which is judging one another. We take people side by side and say one is better – more godly – more righteous – more Christian. We may not canonize people in our tradition but we do size each other! You hear it in our common language. When someone behaves in a way we find offensive, we look down our noses at them and may even question whether they are a Christian at all. We do it with those we admire as well “She was a REAL saint.” We elevate those of great courage, or tremendous faith, or deep commitment and see them as possessing something that we as ordinary folk simply do not have.

The Beatitudes seem to lend themselves to this enterprise. Here we have the categories - the virtues - that the super righteous possess: merciful, peacemakers, the pure in heart. Some have tried to wrestle this passage from a lofty description of the saints among us by claiming that this passage describes the attitudes we all need to take hold of if we want to find personal fulfillment in life; the “Be-Happy-Attitudes” as one famous preacher once called them. I don't think I need to spend a whole lot of time to show why that might not be the most helpful way to read these verses.

Here is a perspective that I have found helpful in trying to uncover why Jesus offered these words to his disciples at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. I was reminded this week in my reading of the honor-shame culture in which these beatitudes are spoken. In that culture you were

important because of who you were connected to (your family members, your patrons, your clients).¹ Honor is prized above all. To lose honor is to lose more than just public standing. To lose honor, to be shamed, means a loss of social connection all together and all of the safety nets that go with it. Shame can come just by virtue of who you are connected to. Jesus is connecting himself and standing with the outcasts (the poor, the meek) and by naming them here brings honor to them.

He does this not just in these beatitudes. This is the whole of Jesus' ministry. Everywhere he goes he looks for the outcast, the ignored, the shamed, and the ridiculed. He sees them – the ones others cannot bear to look at. He seeks them out – the ones others avoid at all costs. He engages them in conversation. He invites them to share a meal and in so doing scandalizes the so called “honorable” among them. And as he does this, the kingdom of heaven comes near to them in these moments of kindness and connection when the whole social order is turned upon its head and they receive the blessing, the honor, the dignity that IS their birthright as beloved of God but has been denied them at every turn.

At Monday morning staff meeting, Andrew Spidahl shared a piece for devotions from a book called *Tattos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* by Gregory Boyle. I liked the excerpt Andrew shared so much that I started reading the book. I'm about half way through. It's a compelling account of a Jesuit priest named Gregory Boyle who was sent to pastor a parish in the inner city of Los Angeles in an area that had the most prolific gang activity of any place in the United States. He walked the streets; he talked to the people living there including the gang members. Based on what he was hearing his congregation opened a school and eventually formed several businesses. They hired members of rival gangs to run these establishments. They offered job training, addiction recovery, mental health services. The church was booming with activity and with people from all walks of life. Some were not as thrilled as others about the direction the ministry was heading. Boyle describes the place as a Who's

¹ Sarah Dylan Breuer's blog mentions this insight as coming from Jerome Neyrey in his book *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*.

Who of Everybody Who was a Nobody. One Sunday, Father Boyle took on one of the points of constant grumbling in his homily.

“What’s the church smell like?”

People were mortified and wouldn’t meet his eyes so he threw it out again.

Someone from the back yells “it smells like feet.”

“Excellent. But why does it smell like feet?”

“Cuz some homeless men slept here last night”

“Well, why do we let that happen?”

Someone offers, “It’s what we committed to do.”

“Well, why would anyone commit to do that?”

“Because it’s what Jesus would do,” someone says

“Well, then....what’s the church smell like now?”

And a man stands up and yells “It’s smells like commitment!”

“It smells like roses!”

The place just exploded in laughter and cheers as they found a kinship with the men who were sleeping in their church. In reflecting on the experience, the Beatitudes came to mind and he realized that the best way to render these words is to say” ‘You know you are in the right place if....you are single-hearted or work for peace.’ The Beatitudes is not spirituality, after all. It’s a geography. It tells us where to stand.”²

² Gregory Boyle *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2010), 74-75.

This book will have you in tears a hundred times over as he recounts story after story of people discovering who they are before God: people being filled and receiving mercy and seeing God and stories of deep sorrow, and persecution. This a book full of saints – by which I mean – this is a book full of stories of people standing in the right place to be swept up in this work of God to bring honor to those whom the world has dishonored so that they can discover the delight that God takes in them.

It isn't just our virtue that matters. It's the geography of our life that matters! Are we standing in the places where God can remind us and others through us what it means to be called the children of God? Do we locate ourselves in the places where we can bear witness to God's grace sweeping over a life to bring comfort and fulfillment and mercy? Can we let go for one minute to what Boyle calls "our overactive disapproval gland" in order to join with Jesus in simply meeting people with open arms and open hearts to celebrate the goodness of God that is in us all?

As we come to the table, may we come knowing that this is one of the places where we need to stand with regularity if we are to truly understand what makes us into saints of God.

For here we find a feast, a table overflowing with grace and love, and we dine here not because we have made a place for ourselves but because God has made a place for us.

"See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

Thanks be to God!

Matthew 5.1-12

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

4 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the gospel of our Lord
Praise be to you, O Christ.