

All Saints' Day

November 1, 2009

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Sermon Title: "Rejoice and Be Glad!"

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Our text for All Saints' Day is taken from the Gospel reading in Matthew, where our Lord tells His disciples during the Sermon on the Mount:

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

This is our text.

Rejoice and be glad! We have a great deal for which we can rejoice, can't we? After all the months of waiting and praying, after the agonizing time in making a decision, after weighing all the options carefully... Minnesota Vikings fans can rejoice that they have a halfway decent quarterback.

Not quite what you were expecting me to say, was it? Maybe you thought that I was talking about Messiah here in Mandan, and how your prayers were finally answered and you have a full time shepherd once again. Maybe you are rejoicing simply because church services are once again at 9:00 in the morning instead of 11:00. Or at the very least, you might not have expected a devoted Packer fan like myself ever say something nice about the Vikings. At best, you would think I would be quietly cursing that day when Brett Favre ever left Mississippi and headed North to Minnesota...

But in our Gospel lesson for this morning as we commemorate on this day of All Saints—the day in which we remember those from our midst who were called to glory during the past year—the disciples may have reacted to Jesus' last statement in verse twelve in the same way. After all, in verse eleven, Jesus has just finished telling the people who are gathered around Him:

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kind of evil against you falsely on my account."

You are blessed when others persecute you? And Jesus wants us to rejoice and be glad about this? Who does He think He's fooling? Or, in true Lutheran fashion, let us ask the question: what does this mean?

As we examine our text from Matthew this morning, I'd like to begin by clearing up one popular misconception. There are some pastors in other Christian denominations who look at the Beatitudes as some sort of "terms" or "conditions" to be placed upon a Christian in order for him or her to become blessed. In other words, you might be tempted to think that you need to BE poor in Spirit in order to somehow earn your way into the kingdom of heaven. As a matter of fact, some preachers have even called these the "Be-attitudes" as if you need a certain attitude in order to obtain the blessings that God has already given us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But the word Beatitude comes from the Latin word "beatus" which means "blessed". It has nothing to do with our attitudes. And the blessings don't come to us because of what we have done. They come to us because of who we ARE: redeemed, baptized children of God through Jesus' own blood and righteousness.

"Rejoice and be glad!" Jesus says. But sometimes we may find it difficult to rejoice in light of what is going on in our lives. We don't want to rejoice, we don't want to be joyful, and we don't understand why Jesus is telling His disciples and us to do so in this particular passage. On All Saints' Day in particular, we remember those who have been called to glory in expectant hope of being reunited with our loved ones in heaven or at the great day of resurrection.

But sometimes circumstances in our lives don't make it easy for us to rejoice about those who have been called to glory before us, do they? Pastor Wolfgram told me about one of the three names mentioned in our bulletin—Landon Kuhn—who wasn't even a year old when she passed away. I look at my own daughter Hope and can't possibly imagine the pain, the suffering and the mental and physical anguish my wife and I would feel if we would wake up one morning and find her breathless, lifeless body lying in the crib.

And yet even a child at that age is one who especially exemplifies the poor in Spirit which Jesus mentions as His first of the Beatitudes. Helpless, unable to do anything, our children are brought forward to the font in order to be baptized, and by the power of the God's Word and the water, the Holy Spirit works the miracle of faith even in a newborn infant. The kingdom of heaven is indeed theirs, as it is indeed for all of us poor miserable sinners. Indeed, we are truly blessed. Rejoice and be glad!

Jesus went on in the next verse to say "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted". One

of the shut-ins that I used to visit in Mt. Pulaski, IL told me a tale of tragedy that few could bear. She said that she had lost a son and a grandchild in a car accident as they were struck by a drunk driver. She had been a widow for a number of years as well. But her faith remained firm in the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Each time I would visit her she used to tell me that she didn't understand how unbelievers could ever deal with death. They don't have the sure hope and promise of heaven with our Lord. She mourned, and she was comforted, and she was blessed. Rejoice and be glad!

Jesus goes on to say a couple of verses later: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied." How often are there those who feel that hunger, that are empty inside waiting for that thirst to be filled? Certainly there are those in the world who try to fill their needs with alcohol, drugs, sex, popularity, work, or anything else you can name or imagine. Many of us even find *ourselves* placing other things above God and slip into this selfish sin of worshipping the god of "me, myself and I". It is at those times that we truly need to examine ourselves, to look into our hearts and confess our sins, as Luther once had to say about this passage: "We have the clear assurance that God does not cast aside sinners, that is, those who recognize their sin and desire to come to their senses, who thirst for righteousness."

Every week as we gather around the Lord's Table, we get the tremendous opportunity to have that hunger and thirst for righteousness filled. As we approach the altar with repentant hearts, we examine ourselves with the desire to have that same forgiveness of sins, life and salvation that Jesus has promised to us and gives us through His body and blood. Rejoice and be glad!

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy". Jesus isn't commanding us to be merciful. He's not doing a sort of tit-for-tat where He says, "If you do this for me, then I'll do this for you". There would be no way for us to ever do enough, would there? But God has already shown us mercy through the suffering and death on the cross of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We are not blessed because we show mercy, rather as Christians and disciples of Jesus we have already received it. And since we have already been shown mercy that we cannot possibly ever earn or deserve, it's only natural for us to want to go and share that Good News and be merciful to others, isn't it? In a world where the world reviles us and scoffs at us because we are considered to be intolerant, bigoted or homophobic, we know the true mercy that has been shown to us by God through the redemption that has been obtained for us through Jesus Christ. We have indeed, been blessed. Rejoice and be glad!

People loved by God, we could go on for hours and hours taking apart these wonderful words of our Lord, but then we would miss out on the fellowship hour after church and the choir members would be late for the mass choir rehearsal this afternoon, wouldn't they? The point is, Jesus begins His sermon on the Mount with these nine Beatitudes, these marvelous blessings which were to come not only for His disciples, but also for every child of God whose robes have been washed and made white by the blood of the Lamb of God seated upon the throne. These precious, promised blessings are God's gracious gifts to all who repent of their sins and trust in Christ Jesus alone for righteousness.

When we recognize our own spiritual poverty, when the Lord leads us to hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, when He makes us pure in heart so that we seek to worship the true God alone, then we are truly blessed, now and forever. Then we can truly rejoice and be glad, no matter what befalls us, no matter how we may be assailed by the devil the world and our own sinful flesh. We can rejoice and be glad because we have a Savior who has delivered us from eternal death and eternal damnation, for great is your reward in heaven.

Let us now go forth in the joy and peace of the Lord, so that others may be blessed by the eternal blessings of our Lord, and that they might also rejoice and be glad with us. May God grant this for Jesus' sake, Amen.

And now the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord, Amen.