

All Saints' Day Year A

The Beatitudes and Barriers

[RCL] Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12

When we hear Jesus' beatitudes, what do we think? Maybe, we think, "Wow, these are the most beautiful words I have ever heard." We may think, "Wow, these are beautiful words, but like so many beautiful words, they're fanciful, and they can't really be followed in the real world." We may think, "Wow, these are beautiful words, and, oh my, they are another reminder of all the ways I fail to live up to the high calling of being a disciple of Christ."

Well, if you have ever thought any of these, you are not alone. The Beatitudes have been a source of inspiration and challenge throughout the history of the church. Today, I want to mention a few major approaches to them.

During the Middle Ages, many people saw the Beatitudes as "Counsels of Perfection". That is, they were things that applied to a spiritual elite made up of priests, monks, and nuns, but not to ordinary folks. Monks and nuns took extraordinary vows of poverty and obedience, so these things about blessings of the poor, the meek, the hungry, the merciful were about folks seeking perfection, but for other people, keeping the Ten Commandments and loving God and our neighbor is enough. This approach recognizes the real challenge these sayings put upon believers, but it limits the full force of them by saying that, in this life, they are only for a spiritual elite.

During the Reformation, Martin Luther took issue with the whole notion of a spiritual elite. The idea that there were higher and lower levels of Christians was repugnant to him. Luther famously proclaimed the priesthood of all believers, that is, that we are all on the same level—no higher, no lower—all called to share in the priestly ministries of the Church. So, Luther saw the beatitudes as applying to all Christians, not just to the few.

But Luther also had a pretty interesting take on the Beatitudes. He saw them as commands of God. And for Luther, while commandments were things that were given by God, and, therefore holy and binding on all people, Luther also felt that human beings, given our fallen nature, can never *really* fulfill the commandments. Rather, what the commandments do for Luther is point out very clearly that there is no way that human beings will ever be able to earn their salvation by perfectly following God's will. The upshot is that what the commandments end up doing is pointing out our need for the forgiveness and mercy of God and drive us into the arms of Christ. This approach sees the Beatitudes as so challenging that we will never be able to fulfill them on our own. We need to turn to the grace and mercy offered in Christ if we are ever to be made right with God.

Most New Testament scholars these days don't find these approaches helpful. Rather, they see the Beatitudes—and indeed the whole Sermon on the Mount—as something that Jesus saw as applying to all his disciples, not just an elite few, and he probably thought that they were, in fact, doable. Certainly not easy, after all, he says, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Still, most scholars think that he probably meant for his followers to live this way. That's probably why they stress that these were things that need to be lived out in the context of Christian community. These are not things for spiritual superheroes, but for communities to live out. And that's probably also why Jesus stressed the need and reality of forgiveness and reconciliation in our communities. These things are going to take practice.

So, one of the reasons why we have this Gospel lesson on All Saints' Day is because they are practices for all the saints. And by all the saints, we mean everybody who has been baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are practices for all of us ordinary saints of God.

Today, I want to focus on just one beatitude and explore how we might try to live that out in our ordinary lives. We will have other All Saints' Days to deal with other beatitudes. So, let's focus on, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God." Most of us probably will not be Nobel Peace Prize winners. But that doesn't mean we are not called in our own ways to be peacemakers. How may we go about this in our lives? Paul Wadell gives us some practical guidance on how we all can be peacemakers. He reminds us that in Ephesians, Paul speaks of Christ and his cross breaking down the walls that divide us, removing all the barriers that keep us apart, and overcoming the hostilities that so often leave us living more in enmity with one another than in peace.

Wadell says, "There is no shortage of barriers that need to be dismantled if God's dream of peace is to become a reality. We create barriers through our attitudes toward others. We create barriers when we freeze people out or simply ignore them. We create barriers when we refuse to talk to certain people. We create barriers when we refuse to deal with problems that weaken relationships. We create barriers when we refuse to give ourselves to others. We create barriers when we hold on to grudges and refuse to forgive. We create barriers when we nurture cynicism, bitterness, and resentment instead of seeking peace."¹

In Ephesians, Paul tells us to get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slander, and malice of every kind. Paul says leave all that behind, get away from it, and refuse to be ruled by it, because all those things put walls and barriers between ourselves and others. Instead, Paul says be kind to one another, compassionate, and mutually forgiving, just as God has forgiven you

¹ Paul Wadell, *Becoming Friends* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002) p. 36.

in Christ. These are the practices of peace. We nurture peace among ourselves and others when we are people marked by kindness, compassion, healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Happy All Saints’ Day to all you saints of God. The Beatitudes are for you!

The Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano is associate rector at St. Anne’s Church in Annapolis, Maryland. Dr. Pagano’s ministry at St. Anne’s is focused on Adult Christian Formation, Outreach, and Pastoral Care. Dr. Pagano’s gifts for preaching, teaching, and care are all grounded in joyful and grateful service to God, to the Church, and to the world. Dr. Pagano received a Ph.D. in Theology and Ethics from Marquette University. His research interests focus on theology and contemporary society, science and religion, religious pluralism, and the theology and ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr. He holds an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania. He previously served parishes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Baltimore, Maryland. He also served as Assistant Professor of Theology at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, and currently serves as an Affiliate Faculty Member in the Theology Department at Loyola University in Baltimore, Maryland. Dr. Pagano is married to the Rev. Dr. Amy Richter and is delighted to serve with her at St. Anne’s. They have co-authored two books, A Man, A Woman, A Word of Love, and Love in Flesh and Bone.

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