

LEGACIES OF LIGHT

Matthew 5.1-16

November 1, 2020, All Saints

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church



Thank you, Pastor Anita.

One of the hardest things we have done during these COVID days is to go without gatherings to celebrate the lives and grieve the loss of our beloved ones.

Honestly, I never thought I would miss funerals. But here we are. And something feels incomplete without them.

So I wanted to be here this morning. To call out the names of those we have lost in the last year, in this place where they sat and chatted and sang and remembered and served and perhaps got mad and made up. I wanted to come to this place and to experience with them what they knew of love and loss and, what the Book of Common Prayer calls, “the land of light and joy in the fellowship of all your saints.”

And even though I am alone, I am surrounded by that fellowship this morning. Literally, I am surrounded.

I am standing on ground that was tended by the Duwamish who, in their own right, were saints before any of our ancestors arrived here.

I am surrounded by this beautiful wood that is a testimony to the sacred presence of trees and water and earth and sky. Bearers of grace if there ever were such. And therefore saints of their own kind.

I am wearing the robe entrusted to me by Marilyn Pulliam after Walt died and the stole I inherited from Elizabeth Patrick.

I am standing in the pulpit that honors the great educator and student of worship, the Rev. Dr. John Skoglund who was our pastor from 1954 to 1958. And then there all the other faithful and courageous women and men who have stood here before me.

I look out into this great room and what I don't see are empty pews. Because there is Irene sitting with Kathleen and Richard.

There is Fran Parker up there in the balcony with that great throng of Easter-goers.

And Dr. Neil Elgee is standing here to talk about the work of Ernest Becker and how the denial and fear of death can wreak havoc in our lives.

There is Charles and Phyllis sitting in the Fred Lind section about halfway back and Forbes Bottomly in the very back across the aisle from Bev and Don Carmignani.

And in that hallowed section is also Roxana Harper with her Green Bay Packers colors and her dogged commitment to that which is right and true.

And, on the other side, is Virginia Nielsen, after her University Baptist days. She would come sit in the back, I think, because she wanted to grab me before I got distracted. There was always something she wanted to say as she would take my hand and smiled that sweet smile.

It was before my time, but I can see Beryl Harriet Curry, standing here with her husband after WWII, being commissioned as medical missionaries in India and the Philippines.

And if I turn around to the choir, I can see Imogene, that great saint of radical justice. If sometimes I disagreed with her politics, I always admired her passion.

And over there is Constance. And before my time, there was Carolyn McGowen there too.

In the light of my heart and my mind I can see all these - and more – because I'm standing, as the Book of Common Prayers says, in that land of light and joy in the fellowship of all the saints.

I know it's hard right now not being in the same room together. But they are here. And we are here as we hold on to that fellowship of all the saints. That fellowship never did depend on being in the same room. And it doesn't now.

It is the tradition to read this Beatitude text from Matthew 5 on All Saints day. Perhaps that's because the way one becomes a saint in the Roman Church is being "beatified." The Church recognizes those who did something in their life that becomes an ongoing conduit of grace. And perhaps a miracle or two.

"Beatification" is less grand for us. I remember reading a post on Facebook that said: "Live so that the preacher doesn't have to lie about you at your funeral."

That's good advice.

But being "beatified" – being a saint – is less than perfection and more than what we can see of our ordinary lives.

Perhaps on this All Saints we should take a minute to look around that great crowd that had gathered to hear Jesus speak.

The time was not so different from ours. An authoritarian government was in place that kept the peace by dividing the various ethnicities against each other. However just the cause or however powerful the vision, the people were powerless against the structures that kept a ruling minority in place.

And they were coming to hear a man who, as a child, had been a refugee in Egypt. His parents took him and ran when a ruthless local leader took other children, under the age of 2, away from their parents and killed them.

The rich were very rich. And the poor were very poor.

And if you were sick, you were sick. There wasn't a lot you could do and most people thought it was your fault anyway. The best you could hope for was some healer to come along.

Maybe that's why the crowd was so large that day when Jesus started speaking. Jesus said to them:

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. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

13 'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

14 'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same

way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Abba in heaven.”

Pastor Anita reminded us earlier this year that these blessed and blessing qualities are not aspirations. They are descriptions.

Take a look around that crowd.

Over there are the ones whom you might otherwise have overlooked because their spirits seem so poor. They are so down.

You can't miss the grieving ones with their tears and their crying.

You might underestimate the meek because they look like they wouldn't hurt a fly.

There are the passionate activists who are always hungry for a good protest.

And the compassionate ones tending to those who are hurt or sick.

There are the devoted ones who hang on every word.

And the peacemakers who struggle in that balance between accommodation and reconciliation.

And there are the persecuted ones – those who, like the prophets before them, won't let any injustice slide and who find some perverse joy in not being counted among the “cool kids.”

They are all there.

It's not an assembly of the rich and the powerful. It's a “salt of the earth” kind of crowd.

And Jesus turns to them, and best he can, he looks them each in the eye and he says: “You – you – are the light of the world.”

Of course, Jesus and the crowd know Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom shall I be afraid.”

And yet, Jesus says, *you* are the light of the world!

Here's an idea:

What if your light is the very thing you like least about yourself?

What if these famous beatitudes are not aspirations but descriptions of the way we are and the things we find ourselves instinctively doing as we go about the everyday work of loving the world?

What if being a saint has nothing to do with that glow of our finest 1000-watt bulb but is that single moment of light that shines through the cracks in our hearts or that obvious weakness we try to hide or that passion for justice that makes it impossible for us to keep our mouths shut or those moments of tenderness or those flashes of clarity about how the world could be made whole again?

And what if, in all that, we feel a kind of exhilaration because we find ourselves in the company of the great ones both dead and alive? And all that light together is enough to light up a whole house or a whole city or a whole nation?

What if?

Maybe we talk about saints only after they're dead because it's so much easier to see the light of someone's life after the fact.

For instance, we have just finished this series on the values we have affirmed in our life together. So, when we say "we will go deeper in faith by doing justice and loving mercy, working for peace, and walking humbly with God," a light goes on. And we say, yes! Of course, that's Imogene and Roxana.

When we say, "we will be present with another," a light goes on and we say, yes, that's Constance and Bev and Phyllis and the 25-year nursing career of Carolyn. And when we talk about being present and creating venues of engagement where we can learn about viewpoints different from our own, there is the light generated by all those years of international service by Irene and Beryl.

Or when we say, “we will respect all religions,” a light goes on and we see the work of Neil Elgee.

Or “we will welcome the stranger,” there’s a light shining from Virginia Nielsen in her support of Central American refugees in the 1980s.

When we say “we will actively work to recognize and change our own biases ... and fight systemic prejudice,” there’s Charles Peet marching with Dr. King in Alabama and Forbes Bottomly working to desegregate public schools in Seattle. There is more of that light yet to shine.

And when we say that “we will protect the environment,” there is the light that shines through Fran Parker’s sheer love of being out in the world.

None of these folks were perfect. They would be the first to tell you so. But there was a light in each one of them that illuminates the world with those very values we affirm for ourselves.

I’ll borrow a line from a Chanukah song: “Don’t let the lights go out.”

I don’t know what’s going to happen this Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday or January 20 or the whole of 2021.

But I do know this. Whatever happens, like that crowd of Jesus’ day and those who have gone before us through world wars and civil unrest and devastating elections into that land of light and joy, whatever happens *you* – yes, I’m talking directly to you – *you* are the light of the world.

And today, if you hear that voice, for God’s sake, for the world’s sake, for your own sake, do not harden your hearts. March on!