2017-10-29 - “Honored in God’s Kingdom” Matthew 5:1-12 – Michael Cheuk

The Gospel lesson assigned to All Saints Day for this year comes from Matthew, chapter 5, in what many call the “Beatitudes.” In the beginning of verses 3 through 11, Jesus uses the word “makárioi” which is most often translated in the English as “blessed.”

Theologian Dallas Willard argues that the Beatitudes were not spiritual conditions that, when fulfilled, will merit God’s blessing. Jesus’ main theme in these verses was Jesus’ pronouncement of *the availability of the kingdom of heaven*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In Jesus’ day, and perhaps also in ours, people thought that the kingdom of God was available to those who who’ve got it all together physically, socially and spiritually. But Jesus said, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In another words, it is the people who do NOT have it all together, those who’ve messed up, those who are spiritually inadequate …the kingdom of heaven is available to *those* people.

In a world that celebrates “happy people,” in a world that honors people who don’t have a care in the world, Jesus pronounces a blessing to those who find themselves brokenhearted, grief-stricken and in mourning. “**Blessed are those who mourn**, for they will be comforted.” *They* are the ones who will be lifted up and honored in God’s Kingdom.

In a world that awards those who are aggressive in getting all that they can get, Jesus pronounces a blessing to those who are unaggressive, trusting people who have lost their shirts to unscrupulous scam artists. “**Blessed are the meek**, for they will inherit the earth.”

Jesus then said: “**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness**, for they will be filled.” Jesus does not bless those who are *conscious* of their righteousness or those who *are* righteous. Instead, Jesus blesses those who struggle and fail and struggle again for righteousness, all the while knowing just how far they have to go.

In these first four beatitudes, Jesus does not prescribe what people must *do* in order to earn God’s blessing and honor. Against the conventional wisdom of his day – and ours – Jesus blesses the messed up losers, the marginalized and the vulnerable in society…and honors those who are treated with shame, disdain and contempt.

In the next beatitude, Jesus announced: “**Blessed are the merciful**, for they will be shown mercy. In ancient societies based on a culture of honor, a display of mercy toward an adversary is often seen as weakness, a shameful act by a man who does not know how to defend his honor. In these societies, those who fought against hated enemies were honored as heroes. You can also bet that those who pursue reconciliation instead of war would be accused as being unpatriotic, ostracized as traitors, and derided as peaceniks. Yet, Jesus honors these people by saying: **Blessed are the peacemakers**, for they will be called children of God.

Jesus also said: **Blessed are those who are persecuted** because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. According to New Testament scholar Jerome Neyrey, “neither Jesus nor Matthew was concerned about general political “persecution.” Instead, it is more likely that Jesus was referring to being ostracized, driven out or banned from one’s family or community.

In Jesus’ day, righteousness was divided into three parts: duties to God, duties to parents, and duties to ancestors. In an honor culture, families punish those who dishonored them. It is in this specific context that Jesus’ words gain its power as He addresses his disciples: “Blessed are ***you*** when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you ***because of me*.”** Jesus blesses and honors his disciples for their “purity of heart,” for their ultimate, undivided commitment to follow God’s call by welcoming them to come and literally see God in the person of Jesus Christ: “**Blessed are the pure in heart**, for they will see God.”

Because of such honor, Jesus could encourage his disciples and give the first command in these Beatitudes: “**Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you**.” By worldly standards, following Jesus may lead to hardships, a loss of status, a risk of being seen as weak, and possibly even rejection from one’s family. But disciples are in good company as God’s prophets experienced the same hardship and challenges. But the good news is that a new king has arrived, and in his new kingdom, being a disciple of Jesus bestows the highest honor a human being can receive, the esteemed status of a child of God. Therefore, rejoice and be glad because great is your reward!

As I study these beatitudes, here’s my takeaway. Your mileage may vary…

**First**, we who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ, we are beloved children of God. 1 John reminds us: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. . . . Beloved, we are God’s children now.” Martin Luther risked and received the rejection of the Catholic Church. At his heresy trial, Luther wouldn’t recant. Instead, he said: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” We are called to follow Christ, and not only to follow tradition.

**Second,** even as we honor our departed saints, we are reminded that they have received their reward. They have already run the race, and they are among the cloud of witnesses cheering us on to run ours. Martin Luther, in his teaching on the honor of the saints advocated the turning from the dead saints to honor the living saints. Luther said, “The living saints are your neighbors, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, poor people; those who have wives and children, who suffer shame, who lie in sins. Turn to them and help them.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Who are the living saints in our neighborhoods, in our places of work that we might honor? Who in our circles of friendships and acquaintances that might appreciate the love and grace of Christ not only in our minds, but also in our hearts, our hands and our feet? On this day, I imagine your former pastors Arthur Brown and Steve McNeely among the saints in the cloud of witnesses. If they had a chance to tell you: “Peakland Baptist, the best way to honor my memory is for you to…”

How do you think they would answer? And how would you respond? Amen.

1. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy,* p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2015/10/luthers-practical-advise-on-honoring.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)