

All Saints' Day – 2024

Revelation 7:2-17

1 John 3:1-3

Matthew 5:1-12

How many of y'all believe that a humble person is also pretty likely to be merciful? How many of y'all believe that a peacemaker is also pretty likely to be someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness? Most of us have standout virtues. Most of us have attributes that are easily recognizable by our friends and family. Ambition is a virtue, at least in my book. Is it necessarily true that an ambitious person is also going to be wise? Nah, that one doesn't jibe. Y'all know what a constellation is? A constellation is a group of stars that go together, at least historically, to form some sort of image in the heavens. Orion, Cassiopeia, Leo, Scorpius – these are all constellations that have a well-established place in history. People looked at the stars and said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Well looky there, those stars go together. That group of stars looks like a lion. That group looks like a crab. That group of stars looks like a centaur with a bow and arrow." Do virtues go together, like stars, like constellations? When you come across Christ's virtue in another human being, do you say, "well looky there, that's a cluster of virtues that outlines my crucified King? That's a cluster of virtues that outlines a rugged cross?"

Jesus goes up a mountain to teach. It is His first extended teaching in the book of Matthew and it's a dilly. It is a theological introduction. It's called The Sermon on the Mount. Before this sermon begins, Matthew is keen to tell us that His disciples came to Him. A disciple; is that you? Technically, a disciple is a learner, an apprentice, a follower. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is also, by nature, a teacher. He calls us to follow Him. He makes us His disciples. "I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name and they follow me" (John 10). So, what are you learning? Have you learned of Christ's love? Have you learned of Christ's righteousness, His sacrifice, His presence, his humility? What are you learning? What has Christ taught you? Have you learned of forgiveness? Have you learned of mercy? "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). Jesus said that because He truly wants you to learn, in your bones, in your soul, to learn.

Our Lord begins His Sermon by speaking of a constellation – a grouping of virtues that originate in Him, virtues that become ours by being connected to Him. Blessed, He says; these are the beatitudes and they most certainly describe you. They describe you because they describe Him and you are in Him. These attributes describe saints. A saint is a holy one, a believer who has come to share in Christ's life. No one achieves blessedness. No one earns their way to blessedness. But we are to learn, we are to reflect who Christ is in our behavior. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is what our lives are to look like. The world is carnal. The world is infatuated with power, wealth and being cool – whatever that means at any particular time. The world's vain philosophy comes at us with mind-numbing constancy. The world has no inclination toward what is holy. It is foreign to them, a concept that is incomprehensible and useless to the unbelieving world. Do you have you a sense of it – what is holy?

Start with the Lord Christ – He is holy. Not only is the Son of God sinless, but He is the embodiment of everything that is good. He is justice. He is wisdom. He is love. He is mercy. Are you learning from Him? What are you learning? First and foremost, those beatitudes refer to Him. He was and is those things AND He acted in a way that is commensurate with who He was. You are blessed. It is absolutely true. And you are to act in a way that is in keeping with who Christ has made you to be. Learn; grow; become; reflect the glory of the Lord who shares His life with you in the situations that you encounter every day. The pure in heart are those who will not partake in the profane pleasures of the world for such things mock what is holy. The merciful know how much that they have been forgiven, an astronomical debt, and so extending our forgiveness to others ultimately shows the mercy of Christ and His cross, mercy that we couldn't possibly live without. The blessed manifest a constellation of virtue – not one, not two, but all of them. All of Christ's blessedness has been given to you; all of it.

I've begun a new habit. When I'm out and about and I see someone wearing a cross I now have the habit of telling them: "I like your cross" – which I do. Invariably, the person will lift their head and look me in the eye. Sometimes they put their hand on their cross. Usually, they say "thank-you" and tell me something about it. Do you know what's going on in this very human interaction? They think of Jesus. The two of us together think of Jesus and His sacrifice. The two of us together think of Jesus and His sacrifice and that because of Christ's cross we are blessed. A cross is easy to see. How about when you see someone who clearly does something that emanates from a pure heart? How about when you see someone clearly, in a Christian way, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness? What could you say? I like your blessedness. I see the Christ in you. I see my Master's blessedness in you. We are to be seen. Christ's blessedness is to be seen in you, in me, like seeing a cross around someone's neck. We are to see Jesus, the Teacher, at His work, in His disciples, manifesting in them all the beauty that is properly His.

Lutheran theologians call it the mystical union – the very real, the very wonderful union between the Lord Christ and the believer. It has a very strong biblical basis, the mystical union. Here's one of the most powerful Scriptural statements regarding the mystical union: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Here's another: Jesus said: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will produce much fruit" (John 15:5). There are many others regarding this mystical union. The blessed One is in you. He gives you His blessed body to eat and His blessed blood to drink. He gives this to you to make you blessed. And it is so. That, completely by itself, is a great joy. But did you hear the second half of those beatitudes? The second half of each beatitude articulates, promises what is in store for you. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They shall be comforted. They shall inherit the earth. They shall be satisfied. It is a litany of grace, a cavalcade of divine riches for those who are in Christ. They shall see God. That's what is in store for you, the saints of Christ the King.

On a solemn note, the Lord says that we're blessed when we persecuted. The Lord of the cross says that we're blessed when others revile us and say all kinds of evil against us. You are connected to Christ. He was pure of heart, merciful, meek, and the prince of peacemakers and yet the world hated Him. It may be hard for some of y'all to grasp, but on the cross He was blessed, lifted up, high and exalted to the most elevated place. Those who crucified Him could

not rob Him, could not rob the King of His inherent blessedness. The world can't rob you. Nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39). "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). That's the Bible's way of saying Satan's head has been crushed beneath a nail-pierced foot. We are disciples of Christ. We are blessed. It's going to show. The constellation of His virtue is in us. We have every intention of learning from Christ the King "who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Romans 9:5).