

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia
Preparing for Sunday, November 5, 2017 // All Saints' Sunday, Year A

The Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Background and general observations

All Saints' Day is November 1, and many churches, including St. Stephen's Church, use the lessons appointed for All Saints' Day on the Sunday following. Thus, we step out of the usual progression of Gospel lessons and have appointed for this Sunday the well-known beatitudes from the Gospel of Matthew. This is the better known version of the beatitudes. Luke's version has Jesus delivering a Sermon on the Plain (as opposed to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount), and some of its content is stark and unsettling, compared to the version in Matthew.

For example, Matthew's version has nine blessings, and Luke's has four blessings and four contrasting woes. And where the two are similar, Luke's version tends to be starker and more direct. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," but in Luke, Jesus says simply, "Blessed are the poor." There's no spiritualizing of the beatitude in Luke and so no loophole to blessedness for the rest of us who can all legitimately say, "Oh, I'm poor in spirit, all right." And to make matters worse (or at least, to make matters more somber and ominous), Luke's version has Jesus adding some pretty stark woes: "Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing, and who have people who speak well of you." In other words, if you are poor and outcast, with no one out there who cares about you, you are blessed. But if you're getting along swimmingly, feeling pretty good about things, then you're in trouble.

One interpretation might be that Jesus is leading us to an awareness of a blessedness that everyone has by virtue of his or her creation in the image and likeness of God. This is a blessedness and even happiness that is not caused by any external circumstance; it is simply within you. It is your true life. And Jesus was inviting us to awaken to that deepest truth. When we are poor, hungry, weeping, or even reviled, we might (ironically) be in a better position to recognize the source of true blessedness, because our outward circumstances certainly are not bringing us blessing and consolation. But when we are rich, full, laughing, and spoken well of, we might be more prone to being distracted by these worldly pleasures and distanced from God and the source of true life and blessing. One reason for this is that we are often all too happy to settle for worldly comforts, so we become forgetful of heavenly ones.

The blessing God wants you to know does not come from anything you do. It is yours already. The question is whether you will awaken to this reality and live it, or live a life that is content only when your external circumstances (wealth, relationships, standing in society, etc.) are to your liking.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. One dictionary definition of “beatitude” includes “a state of utmost bliss.” Yet, Jesus challenges conventional notions about what it means to be blessed, blissful, and happy.

What do you know about a time in your life when you felt deeply blessed, even blissful, while people around you might have assessed your situation very differently?

What was the source of your blessing?

Why might other people have looked at you and thought of you as being far from blessed?

2. Reread the last two paragraphs of the “Background and general observations” above, and ponder their relevance to your own life.

C.S. Lewis once said of human beings that we are sometimes like children who have been offered a wonderful holiday at the sea, but we content ourselves with—and will not be distracted from—our enjoyment of the mud puddle.

Lewis also said that our lives are like a shop window into which some mischievous character has gotten overnight. This mischievous one has switched around all of the price tags, so that the really expensive and precious things all have very inexpensive price tags, and all of the cheap and worthless things have very high price tags. We’ve been tricked, Lewis says; we behave as if all the cheap and worthless stuff is actually priceless, and we spend our best energy going after these things, while we ignore heaven.

How do you respond? What other metaphors for our human behaviors and tendencies come to mind as examples of ways in which we might fail to appreciate the blessings of our life?

3. Which of Jesus’ promises mean the most to you today, and why? Which of them seem most applicable? Do any of his promises feel as if they are somehow not intended for you? Perhaps Jesus knows something of your gifts that you are not able to see or appreciate. This is often one of the great benefits of fellowship; very often others are able to love us better than we are able to love ourselves.
4. On the feast of All Saints, we remember not just the extraordinary examples of sainthood who are known to everyone (St. Francis, St. Teresa, etc.), but *all* saints, including those who will never be famous.

Who in your life, living or dead, comes to mind on All Saints’ Day as one who has been an important saint in your life? Name this person, and talk about why and how this person is a

saint to you. How has God spoken to you through this person? And how does this person inspire you to live?

If you are in an Emmaus Group, the group might take a moment to sit in silence, as each person in the group calls to mind particular people who have embodied God's love and grace for them. These people, these angels, have been important communication from God, and it is appropriate to remember them in a moment of sacred and attentive silence. After a few minutes, invite anyone who wishes to share with the group the person or people who have come to mind.

We might keep in mind that the Bible suggests that the primary way in which God communicates with us is through other people. What is God saying to you through the saints you have known in your life?