

Homily – Vulnerable Before God

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Today we celebrate our annual observance of the Feast of All Saints and the Feast of All Souls. Technically, these are two different holidays or festivals. All Saints is for the official saints of the Church, and All Souls captures all the others who have died.

With our current understanding of theology and spirituality, we have mashed these two feasts together in recognition that all are the beloved of God. God doesn't play favorites. Some may have achieved a higher level of spirituality and connection, some may be role models for the rest of us, but God loves all. Of this we are certain.

Three and four years ago, in this All Saints service, we remembered those who had gone before us by writing their names on special slips of dissolving paper, and then watching those names and papers dissolve in big vases of water. Perhaps you remember what it felt like to watch the names disappear, once again.

And, for the last two years we have had you submit the names of your loved ones who had died, and we put these names on mobiles that were hung in our side windows. Perhaps you remember looking across the mobiles to find your loved one.

And, this year we had you bring framed photos of your loved ones to put on the side altar. Having pictures of the dead in our worship space is a way for us to remember all they meant, and continue to mean, to us.

Now, how many of you have been to an Orthodox worship service? Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, how many of you have been to an Orthodox service?

I have been only once, and it was memorable, because you stand for the entire service, there is a lot of incense, and the worship space usually has

dozens of icons or portraits of the saints of the church on the walls. These paintings of the many saints surround you as you worship, and there is a sense of being embraced in worship by the saints. From across time and space these holy men and holy women are part of that particular worship service.

And today, our saints have joined us in worship. Whether their photos are here or not, your loved ones are surrounding you and surrounding us. As we worship today, not only are we embraced by God, but we are embraced by those who have died.

Many of you are aware that five weeks ago, I rushed east to be with my dad as he died, and his photo is here. There is comfort in having our loved ones here today.

Today's Gospel readings is about comfort, or at least the first part of it is.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you... Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven;

Some of you will recognize these blessings as Luke's version of the Beatitudes. The better known version of the Beatitudes is in the Gospel of Matthew, but today we have the version of Jesus' Beatitudes as found in the Gospel of Luke.

These blessings or beatitudes have traditionally been seen to bring comfort by encouraging believers to look heavenward during trials and tribulations. During tough times, we are to hold onto God so that we can experience the glory of God in the future.

Now, there are two things that disturb me about this passage of comfort. First, it seems to placate a person's distress rather than remove it.

In 1911, about one hundred years ago, labor activist, Jim Hill, wrote parody lyrics to the gospel tune “sweet by and by.” The parody is titled “The preacher and the slave” but most people knew the song as “pie in the sky.” In this famous parody, Hill marks the tendency of preachers to tell slaves, or anyone who is downtrodden, to work hard and not to complain because their reward is in heaven. Here are the words to the parody.

*Long-haired preachers come out every night,
 Try to tell you what's wrong and what's right;
 But when asked how 'bout something to eat
 They will answer with voices so sweet:
 You will eat, by and by,
 In that glorious land above the sky;
 Work and pray, live on hay,
 you'll get pie in the sky when you die.
 Work and pray, live on hay,
 you'll get pie in the sky when you die.*

I am disturbed by the Beatitudes of Luke, or at least I am disturbed by our traditional use of them, since they seem to placate rather than remove distress. I certainly believe that God blesses the poor and the hungry, but I believe that God does that in this life time.

I think a better interpretation of today's reading is to remember that if you want anything to do with Jesus, or the God who sent him, Luke says you had better go find the poor, the hungry, the captives, the blind, and the outcast. We must join Jesus, as he cares for them. In our hearts we know this even if we don't do it as much as we should. As followers of Jesus we are to be his hands and feet and voice in the world. We are to make a difference in God's kingdom.

Now, there is a second reason that I am disturbed rather than comforted by the Beatitudes of Luke.

You and I, and all of us here today, are some of the most privileged people who have ever lived. There may be times in our lives that we have been oppressed and even hungry, but most of us have advantages in life that many don't have. And in the second part of today's Gospel reading we heard...

Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

A woe, or a curse, is the reverse side of a blessing. If we believe that blessings are effective, and I do, then we must also accept the notion of a curse. If a blessing is the declaration of the holiness and goodness in a person or thing or situation, then a curse, or a woe, is an announcement of the wrong and injustice in a person or thing or situation.

In today's Gospel reading we see Jesus teaching the crowds of people who have been following him around the plains. In today's teaching Jesus first blesses those whose suffering he must have seen up close during his travels. Then he curses those whose wealthy, comfort, and prestige are built upon the same suffering.

This is where you are supposed to squirm in your pews. You are supposed to be disturbed and uncomfortable. I am.

For you see it is woe to us, since a secure financial future, a full stomach, a light heart, and a good reputation are mixed blessings at best because they are temporary. And not only are they unreliable marks of the good life, but they are also deceptive. Rather than being evidence of God's favor, prosperity can actually endanger our relationship with God, as it does to all the rich people depicted in Luke's gospel. They think they are invulnerable.

The rich fool, that we heard about a few weeks ago, is perfectly able to take care of himself and he does so admirably. It is this very self-sufficiency, this false sense of invulnerability, that traps us and separates us from God. It is not only greed that jeopardizes the privileged Christians' relationship with God, but the simple and subtle temptation to think that we can take care of ourselves.

The poor are blessed because God is on their side and because they are vulnerable and forced by their circumstances to rely solely on the mercy and grace of God, from whom all things flow. Blessedness means not only that God exercises a particular concern for one, but also that one relies exclusively on God. This is a very vulnerable state of being, isn't it?

By definition, vulnerability is the emotion we experience during times of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. Vulnerability is having the courage to open to God and let go of control. C.S. Lewis once wrote, to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give your heart to no one.

Most of us think that vulnerability is a sign of weakness and to be avoided at all costs. But, what most of us fail to understand is that vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and experiences that we crave. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, and joy. And, vulnerability is the state at which we are to come before God. This is the gift and blessing of today's Gospel lesson. You are invited to let go of the illusion of control, and be vulnerable before God.

And this gets us back to our celebration of the dead.

Five weeks ago, I had the honor of sitting with my dad as he died. Some of you have had this privilege as well. Bishop Mary calls this holy time. Being with someone as they die is holy time, for it is holy when a person is completely vulnerable before God. And, what can be more vulnerable than the act of dying?

Take a look at the photos that we have with us today. Each of our loved ones who have died has gone through this vulnerability before God. Each of our loved ones continues on in the embrace of God in ways that we can scarcely imagine. They have each been blessed by God with eternal life.

And, since the human mortality rate still hovers very close to one hundred percent, each of us will also be vulnerable before God. Some will achieve this vulnerability and blessing long before death, and for some it is finally achieved in dying. That is the blessing that Jesus promises us in today's Gospel reading. To be vulnerable is to be blessed by God.