

November 1st, 2020

Luke 6:20-31 “The Saints Past and Present”

Today is November 1st also known as “All Saint’s Day.” It’s a day in our church calendar where we remember those who have passed on before us and whose memories we treasure. We do this every year on the first Sunday of November. This year we actually get to observe All Saints Sunday on All Saint’s Day! Our gospel reading this morning comes from Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount which we typically find in Matthew’s gospel. Luke’s less-famous version is usually referred to as the Sermon on the Plain. You don’t hear that one much. And maybe it’s because Luke’s Sermon on the Plain has some of the Bible’s toughest descriptions about what it means to follow Jesus and be a citizen of God’s Kingdom.

Both versions start out with what we call the beatitudes: “Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry, you who weep and mourn, you who are persecuted.” But Luke’s version ramps it up a bit by including the “woes” that go along with the “blesseds.” He makes it into a vice and virtue list. “Woe to you who are rich now, woe to you who are well fed now, you who laugh now, you who are applauded and commended. You’ve had your rewards.” Then he wraps it up with a few instructions on how to live a good life: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.”

These aren’t easy things to do are they? If you go to the downtown plaza these days and “give to everybody who begs from you” you’ll be broke in a twenty minutes. If someone mugs you and you keep turning the other cheek, you’re going to get rushed to the hospital with multiple skull fractures. And if you don’t say something when somebody comes

around to take your belongings, the next night they'll come back and try to take away your neighbor's belongings too. So is Jesus *really* calling us to be naive and easily exploited? Are we supposed to be doormats for everybody to wipe their feet on? I honestly don't think so, but I'm also certain he didn't mean for us to just ignore these words because they're too difficult either. So how on earth are we supposed to live in ways that take these words seriously? How do we use these difficult words as guides to be more in line with Jesus' values? Good question.

One thing I've learned in my journey of faith is that the answers we seek when we read difficult passages like this never come neatly packaged for easy consumption like our little portable communion cups here. The answers to the questions we're looking for end up unfolding along the way as we travel the journey *together*. And when I say "together" I'm talking about what we learned last week: "Together" doesn't just mean First Christian Church in this time and place in history ... I'm talking about "together" as in the saints past and present. *Our* "story" as First Christian Church in Chico goes all the way back to 1883. *Our* story as the Disciples of Christ goes back to 1832. As Protestants, our story goes back to 1517. As followers of Jesus it goes back 2,000 years. And as God's people it goes back to "In the Beginning."

So let's tackle this passage together and draw on the wisdom of the saints since its All Saints Day. First off, let's talk about the challenges of translating ancient Greek into modern English. Somewhere in the evolution of the English language we've lost the ability to distinguish between second person singular and second person plural. In English, the word "you" can mean, one person sitting in a chair. It can also mean many people sitting in a room full of chairs. You have to pay attention and know the context in order to know which "you" is singular or plural. This is where Southerners and Midwesterners get it right. "You" means "you the individual who is sitting in that chair over there." "Y'all" means, "everyone in the room sitting in chairs." To go one step further, if the room is huge, like an auditorium or an arena or a stadium, "All y'all" is an appropriate term as well.

So when we read that Jesus said, “I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” how do we know which “you” it is? Is it “you, y’all, or all y’all?” Well in your typical English translation we really can’t tell, but fortunately in the old Greek manuscripts you know for sure. It’s plural. So it *should* say, “I say to y’all that listen – Love your enemies.” Here’s where it makes a difference: I don’t know of any *single* person who could follow these beatitudes for very long on their own. Being hated and cursed and abused and continuing to turn the other cheek takes its toll on you, even if it’s not a physical attack. It saps your spirit. It robs you of joy. It destroys your hope. If you’re on your own and that’s all you ever experience, you will eventually get crushed. If you live by these words on your own, it’s a recipe for self-destruction. But they were not written to you alone. They were written to and for us all. “*All* y’all.” It was written for a community of faith called to live in this way together. You can hold up against a lot more cursing and still keep on blessing if you’ve got the support of a loving community. You can turn the other cheek a lot better when there are people standing with you. You can give away your shirt and coat without freezing to death if there’s always a group standing with you who’ll wrap you in a blanket and find you another coat. And apart from anything else, people are much less likely to keep abusing you when you’re not alone.

Now what we’re talking about when we seek to live like this is a radically different culture to the mainstream culture around us which is what we’ve been talking about since last Spring. This is a whole new value system. A different cultural framework. We’re talking about seeking to create a community of people sufficiently interconnected with one another so that they can support and nurture and encourage one another even in the face of hatred and exploitation and abuse. So what does this look like? This is a tough one for us Americans, but I want you to think hard about this, okay?

Think for a moment about how the various ethnic communities in our

country maintain their distinctive cultures while living in the midst of the larger “American culture.” Especially the minority communities. They manage to maintain their distinctiveness by creating strong sub-cultures with distinctive features. And they do this by spending enough time together to affirm each other in their desires to maintain their ways against all the pressures around them to give up and just assimilate. It’s sad that a lot of folks want to give these communities grief for hanging on to that distinctiveness. “Why can’t they assimilate? Why can’t they just be Americans? Why do people have to be African Americans or Asian Americans? We’re all Americans. You don’t see us walking around flying Irish flags saying, ‘I’m an Irish American!’” Except on March 17th, right? But this is what being a Christian was like in the first century. “Why can’t these people just assimilate? Why can’t they just be Romans? Why can’t they just be Jews? Why can’t they just say, ‘Caesar is Lord’ and stay out of trouble?” Well, because their first allegiance was to Christ. Jesus told his followers to go ahead and give to Caesar that which is Caesar’s, but first and foremost to give to God what is God’s. The Apostle Paul said, be *in* the world but not *of* the world. I’m convinced that if we are to take these words of Jesus seriously we need to find ways of sustaining each other in radically different lifestyle and values system choices just like the early church did. And the only way we’re going to make that happen is to offer and receive that mutual support to each other.

Here’s something we already do though. We come to this table every week with all the saints past and present recognizing that we’re not in this alone, and if we were alone, we wouldn’t have made it this far. This is what All Saints Day is about. It’s about recognizing that if we’re going to live by the values that Jesus calls us to live by, we’re going to be absolutely dependent not only on God but on these saints gathered here this morning. And not just you, but all the saints who have sought to follow Jesus in various places down through the ages.

The world is pretty screwed up right now. And it’s not just 2020 either. We’ve been in this state for a good while. And if we want to resist the

seductive power of this hard-hearted world around us and to follow Jesus instead, we've got to do it in company of those living among us now *and* in the company of those who have gone on ahead. We need to cherish and draw on their wisdom, their encouragement, their prayers, their memory. We need to take the time to hear one another's stories, and to listen to the stories of those who've gone before us. We've got to find ways of developing a closeness that will enable us to know and sense what's going on in one another's lives so that we can support, nurture and encourage one another. And above all else we've got to spend time together gathering around this table, this place where our prayers and praises unite with the prayers and praises of the whole communion of saints across the world and across the ages and with the whole creation in honor of the one God who holds us together in one body - the fullness of Christ who dwells in and among us.