



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Blessedness

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 6, 2016
All Saints' Sunday
Based on Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

I grew up on the weekends near the riverbank of the St. John's, and our main swimming hole was on a tributary called Herald's Point.

On one warm Sunday afternoon, we went out for a swim only to find the entire area swarming with people in white clothing. We saw people disappearing down the path to the river, toward the sound of singing.

My cousins and I went down the river to look back at the group. We saw 50-75 adults and teenagers walking into the water. Brother Grace was in town and he didn't like baptizing in a building. He wanted baptism to be outdoors, natural, authentic. Jesus was baptized in a river and they would be, too.

"Wade in the water," they sang. "Wade in the water, children ... wade in the water, the Lord's gonna trouble the water."

And the water was troubled! Heaving and splashing and dunking. Each person was plunged down into the murky deep, and then snatched up by Brother Grace.

That was my first exposure to such a diverse group of Christians—all in one place—celebrating entrance into God's family ... into the company of saints.

Today we celebrate all the saints, and as part of our celebration we remember the faithful departed and we gather at our own form of the river—the font—to baptize into God's community this child.

In short, Christ called and calls a vast array of humanity to be the household of God: sinners, Pharisees, tax collectors, harlots, priests, engineers, homemakers, scientists, musicians, actors, hedge fund managers, men, women, gay, straight, black, white, brown, adults and children. God gathers us into the communion of saints, and in this community,

- God widens the boundaries;
- God shapes us with the values of Jesus;
- God gives us new siblings;
- Our family crest becomes that of an empty tomb;
- We're told that our talents, resources, relationships, and time do not finally belong to us;
- And in this communion of saints, love of neighbor means caring about and valuing and respecting anyone for whom Christ died.

When the beatitudes are inscribed on banners or framed as wall hangings or illuminated on religious note cards, they are always the familiar verses from Matthew's Gospel. But today, we heard Luke's account, where there are only four (in summary of Matthew's seven), and the four are those that speak of what's missing, what's lacking.

That's one reason why they stick in our throat a bit when we recite them. And the other reason is that Luke's Beatitudes are directed especially to us. While Matthew says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Luke has Jesus

looking his disciples right in the eye and saying to us: "Blessed are you poor, Blessed are you that hunger now, Blessed are you when you are excluded."

The point is that those who follow Jesus, instead of being filled with satisfaction at our own good fortune or keen insight, are those acutely aware of what's missing in our lives, what's wrong in life, what's empty and weak in ourselves, what's lacking in a world where political candidates treat each other like garbage, where terrorist groups slaughter innocent children, and where world hatred and hunger persist.

Followers of Jesus, then, are poor, empty, with no claim of self-satisfaction. That is a theme that is played over and over again in Luke's Gospel. It is in that Gospel where Jesus begins his ministry teaching in the Synagogue at Nazareth, using as his text from Isaiah, "he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor..." And it is in Luke's account only that Mary's song is remembered: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

Passionate concern for the poor is at the heart of the Christian way and the saintly journey. Many times in our lives, we have to choose sides, whether we side with those who have, or those who have not, and the Gospel imperative makes clear that Christians are on the side of the poor and hungry.

But a crucial ingredient in ministering to the poor and the hungry is awareness of our common poverty, our common hunger, our need for peace and justice.

Now, you would think that people convinced of what's missing in their lives would be pretty gloomy—and to be sure, some are—or they are at least bored. Jesus tells us, however, that's a blessed state, a holy happiness, for that awareness of reality is the source of both a passion for change and an unshakable confidence in the springs of true Gospel love and transformation.

Many times, I've had conversations with people who say they won't go to church because of all the hypocrites here. I don't deny it for a minute. I hope everybody here is aware of hypocrisy, if by "hypocrites" we mean people whose day-to-day behavior reveals a large gap between what we want to be in our love and in our concern for others, and where we find ourselves. And if I ever perceive that gap to be closed within myself, I suspect my soul will be in peril.

It is our perception of that gap—our sense of hunger within, or inner poverty and powerlessness—that sends us to our knees in confession and to this font for baptism and to this table to be fed. And what we find there, on our knees and at the waters of baptism and within the holy meal, are fresh springs of life, the true source of change, renewal, recovery, and influence ... What the Apostle Paul describes to the Ephesians: "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you ... his glorious inheritance among the saints."

Martin Luther King, Jr. tells the story of his movement from poverty of spirit and powerlessness to a life sustained by God's guiding grace. It was the most important night of his life.

"It was around midnight," he writes in his sermon *God is Able*. "You can have some strange experiences at midnight. The threatening caller had rattled me deeply. 'Nigger, we are tired of you and your movement. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.' I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born ... she was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me any minute.

"And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak. Something said to me, 'You can't call on your Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta. You can't even call on your Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power of love that can make a way out of no way.'

"And I discovered then that Christianity had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, 'Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm on the right side of history. I think the cause that

we represent is right. But Lord, I confess that I am weak. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.' And then it happened: And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin, stand up. Stand up for the truth. Stand up for justice. I will be with you. I will never leave you. My love will win.' "

Jesus said, "You're blessed when you are poor and you know you need God."

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