

“Blessed by the Saints:
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 5, 2017

Matthew 5: 1-12

Debbie and I have been walking down memory lane this fall with music concerts. Friday night, we went and saw Billy Joel at Bankers Life Fieldhouse. He’s been one of our favorite musicians and performers since we were in high school. The last time we saw him live was in Glasgow, Scotland, nearly twenty years ago, when he performed alongside Elton John. It was a great show, and brought back wonderful memories of singing to his music in the car, in dorm rooms, or with friends. We decided it was important to go see him now, because you never know if there’ll be another chance – I mean, he is only 68-years-old!

Then, back in September, we went to see U2 play at Lucas Oil Stadium. It was the first time we had seen them live, and they played their entire “Joshua Tree” album on the thirtieth-anniversary of that landmark album being released. We were in high school when that album came out, and ever since I have been a fan of U2. Their music is powerful, insightful, and speaks to issues of social justice of the past and present in ways very few musicians can. And honestly, it’s four guys from Ireland just creating an incredible sound, with music that is inspiring. It was by far the best thing I have seen in Lucas Oil Stadium in months – certainly this year! (Sorry – that’s a dig at our home football team.) And, as I will share with you later, there was another personal motivating factor to hear them in person.

There is something about music that allows for memories to flood back into our minds and hearts. We hear a particular song, and we are taken to a moment in time that is vivid and meaningful. We hear a lyric or chord or melody, and we are reminded of that friend who sat beside us in class, or that family member who drove with us in the car. Music is one of the influential ways we can feel a connection to people and events, both present and past.

On this All Saints’ Day, we recall memories of loved ones, friends, church members, and beloved family who have been a part of our lives, and now reside in God’s heavenly kingdom. For some of us, those are memories that bring smiles to our faces and to our hearts. For others of us, those are memories that bring tears to our cheeks or yearning in our souls. However we face this day when we give thanks to God for these saints, we are reminded by Jesus that we are blessed by God’s Spirit through them, as they offer grace and love and hope in our daily walk of faith.

Matthew's account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount makes clear how many people had already been touched by Jesus' teaching and healing, and were following him to learn much more. Out of Jesus' mouth came what we have come to know as the Beatitudes. They are those sayings which are so familiar: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." They are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, they are the teachings which set the stage for Jesus' greatest lessons on God and the heavenly kingdom. It was from these nine beatitudes that the crowds were opened to God's grace and wisdom through God's only Son.

I wonder how they reacted when they heard them. I know that I always thought they were the simple rules by which I was to live. Be a peacemaker, hunger and thirst for righteousness, be merciful to your brother or sister - if I did those things, I would be living according to Christ's example. I'm sure many of us grew up with that impression of the Beatitudes, that they were a moral rulebook which directed the Christian in his or her life. Oftentimes, that's what we're looking for from the Bible - a set of guidelines which can help us lead our lives better. We can't seem to set the rules for ourselves, as we constantly forget them or break them. Many times, we are trying to find in the Bible the lessons of life which can provide the structure, the framework, and the rules by which we are to conduct our lives.

We usually assume that this is the only place where beatitudes appear, that they are something which Jesus originated. Well, that's actually not true. In fact, beatitudes occur in both the Old and New Testament, and are rooted in the literature of the Jewish tradition. A beatitude is a whole body of sayings with a similar literary form, such as the repetition of the sayings in Matthew 5. Yet they are also found in the Psalms and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. So, when Jesus tells the crowds these first thoughts of the Sermon on the Mount, he is speaking in a way which is familiar and understandable to them. The order and rhythm of the sayings would have been easy to understand, for the people would have heard those same things in the synagogue.

Perhaps what is so easily lost in the Beatitudes is the fact that God is granting his blessing on those who show these traits. These verses could be translated "Happy are those who are meek or poor in spirit . . ." but that doesn't do justice to what is being said by Jesus. It's more that being happy, or being glad. It's about being blessed, being marked, being claimed by God because of who you are and what you are doing. These nine sayings are putting the emphasis on God, not on individuals. They are an act of God which occurs through human beings, an act of God which shows the love and grace of God which we cannot create on our own.

Whenever we reduce these sayings of Jesus to a moral checklist, we place the emphasis on ourselves and how they will lead us to a better life. “If I just became more pure in my heart, I would find peace and happiness. If I just worked for peace between my neighbors, I would be successful in my friends’ eyes.” Whenever we try to box these sayings into a list of “rights and wrongs”, we are not fully aware of what Jesus intended for his audience to understand on that hillside.

He wanted them to see that he was more than some special prophet who had come to teach them. He was more than some faith healer who cured their infirmities. He had already been singled out when he was baptized by John through the mark of the Holy Spirit and God’s affirmation that “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In him the people touched God, heard God, saw God face-to-face. He was Emmanuel, God with us.

Because he was who he was, Jesus came not preaching about the here and now, but about what is to come. The Sermon on the Mount is his opportunity to allow people to see what the future holds, what God’s kingdom is like and how they will be a part of it. Notice that each of the beatitudes begins with the present tense, and ends with the future tense: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” One way to interpret these sayings is to first recognize that there are, in the present, people who are being merciful, who are pure in their hearts, who are seeking peace. Whenever we recognize that these traits are present in the people around us, we are reassured that God is present with us here and now. When we accept that fact, then we can truly place our trust in God that there will be a life hereafter. That is the message which Christ brought to a hillside in Galilee. That is the message Matthew wanted to communicate to the early Church. That is the message God is calling us to hear: God is here, and God’s kingdom is not far away.

William Willimon writes: *It’s odd, there are people who think that the purpose of the Christian faith is to get us ready to forsake this cold cruel world for another. Christianity is where we get our entrance ticket to heaven, our passport into eternal life. And it is true, that when Jesus begins this sermon, he speaks in the future tense. The whole new world that he describes, is not here yet, not in its fullness . . .*

And yet in the sermon, Jesus switches from the future tense to the present tense. He tells us what to do, here, now, if we want to be part of the new world that is coming. He gives us the privilege of being a beachhead, a first wave of that new world. Every time we forgive, or do not return evil for evil, we show our citizenship. A little piece of the new reality becomes visible in you (*Pulpit Resource, Vol. 33, No. 1, January, February, March 2005: Logos Productions, Inver Grove Heights, MN: 24*).

One of the saints that I am thankful for today is my uncle, David Prince. David died three years ago, and was one of my mentors in ministry. He and my aunt, Nancy, served Presbyterian churches in New

Jersey, and after retirement, David served in interim ministry in churches and as presbytery staff. He was a strong voice for justice, for inclusion, and for teaching the Reformed faith to future generations.

One of the churches he served was as interim pastor at Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York City. As you might expect, he saw all sorts of things during his time in a metropolitan area like that. And one Sunday, David preached a sermon on greed and how money was taking the place of God in many people's lives, especially in a setting like New York and Wall Street. It was prophetic, to be sure, but people respected him for never shying away from speaking truth to power.

There was a visitor in church that day who made it a point to speak to David following the worship service. He had come seeking spiritual nourishment, and felt God's voice in that moment speaking at him, to him. Their encounter was one of mutual engagement and respect, and led to ongoing conversations. It reaffirmed for that visitor his passion for justice as it relates to the poor and the voiceless in this world. It was God-given and God-driven, to be sure.

You see, that visitor who came to Rutgers Presbyterian Church and heard God's saint, David Prince, that Sunday was Bono, lead singer of U2.

As I sat in Lucas Oil Stadium in September, and heard Bono sing, along with his bandmates, I pulled out my phone and read the email he sent to my aunt upon the death of David three years earlier. I will not share that with you - that is personal and private and treasured by our family, to say the least. But suffice it to say, it was my reminder of how God is always present and working in our midst - especially through saints of the past and the present - to bring God's kingdom just a bit closer each and every day.

Thanks be to God for us being blessed by the saints, yesterday, today, and forever. Amen.