

MAY WE ADHERE TO THE VALUES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

All Saints Sunday

November 2, 2025

All Saints – All Souls Day. The scriptures tell us that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a multitude of those now dead who support and encourage us in our journey of life. It is on days like this that the church proclaims that we live in liminal time, in a thin time where the thick tapestry that usually seems to separate us from them becomes a thin wispy veil, and we can sense their presence.

On days like this we draw near to many; to those we have loved but no longer see; to those heroes and saints of the church who cheer us on. On days like this we become more aware that we are indeed surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who are among us. Those who struggled and lived their lives by the values spoken of in today's gospel.

Today's gospel event in Luke is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain or the list of blessings and woes, while Matthew's gospel refers to it as the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes – the blessings. In this message Jesus lays out core values of the kingdom of God, values deserving of great blessing, and four opposing values that are deserving of sorrow and distress. Not surprisingly, both sets of values – those we are called to aspire to and those we are to avoid – can be found in any secular society. But it may or may not surprise you to learn that both sets of values are found within many if not most religious communities as well. Yes, the values of the kingdom of God and the values of secular society are found within any Christian denomination or church from the earliest centuries of Christianity down to our present day. They may even be found among our beloved Good Shepherd community.

Let's dig into Luke's Sermon on the Plain. As Jesus and a large crowd of his disciples descended the mountain that day, he looked out on the broad plain below and saw it dotted with a vast multitude of humanity. Many people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds who had come from many, many, miles around to hear him and to be healed. The crowd was made up of people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and even as far away as the coastline of pagan Tyre and Sidon.

When Jesus finally stepped out onto the plain, the people started jostling for position and crowding around him, trying to touch him, hoping for a healing, hoping for an exorcism. They were tradesmen and common laborers and the poor and women and children and some in expensive fine clothing and members of the powerful religious authority. Jesus healed many that day who were poor – and well-to-do, hungry – and well-fed, desperate – and those who had never known desperation, the grieving – and those who had never experienced grief.

Finally, he turned his attention, and his message, from the needy masses to his large group of genuine followers, his many disciples who were present. The words Jesus was about to speak were meant specifically for them, and for all his disciples down through the centuries, including you and me. They would be words of warning and blessing. Jesus knew that if his movement to usher in the kingdom of God were to survive and flourish, his followers would need to understand just how radically different the values were in his father's kingdom. He was getting ready to tell them just how different their lives must be than most in the world around them.

He began to speak:

- My followers, you see these many poor people all around you? I tell you, you are blessed when you are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

- You see these hungry people who didn't even take the time to bring along any food to this deserted place? I tell you, blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled.
- You see these distraught grieving masses of humanity? I tell you, blessed are you who weep, for you will one day laugh.
- You see these people of various skin tones and cultures; many who are unclean and reviled according to our Jewish religion? I tell you, blessed are you who are hated and excluded and reviled on account of me. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

As the disciples listened to this list of blessings that would come to them who are poor and hungry and grieving and reviled; I believe these words encouraged them, and gave them hope, because they had given up much to follow Jesus. They were indeed poor by any human standard. And as they traveled from place to place, they were often hungry. And many of them were indeed grieving the families and communities they had left behind to follow Jesus. And choosing to be followers in the Way of Jesus was in many ways a lonely risky business. It had placed them on the outside of respectable society, and they had often felt threatened. Jesus was telling them that they were blessed for being thus, for living by these values.

But at the same time Jesus words caused their hearts to sink, for despite the blessing that would be theirs for their poverty and hunger and grief and being reviled, they still held out hope that one day Jesus would establish his literal kingdom on earth and put each of them in positions of influence and importance with full bellies and coins in their pockets. And now they realized that this was not to be. Jesus continued his teaching with a list of woes:

- You see these wealthy people dressed in fine clothing with full bellies? I say woe to you, my disciples, when you are rich now, for that is the extent of your eternal reward; for you who are full now, for you will be hungry.
- Sorrow and distress will be your lot when people admire you and speak well of you. For that is how your ancestors were treated by the false prophets who only spoke words they knew the people wanted to hear.

Jesus told them that his disciples would be blessed when they are poor and hungry and grieving and reviled. If you and I are to follow in the way of this savior and prophet Jesus, it would mean living in a way very different than that of society; a path of descent rather than ascent, of taking the lowest seat at the table, picking up the towel and basin, picking up our cross of execution and following Jesus.

Jesus was saying that if we are to be his disciples, then we must be like the true prophets of old not like the false prophets. We must be like Jesus the greatest of prophets who spoke God's words in truth, with little concern for the consequences, and not like the false prophets who were set only on pleasing people; on comforting and affirming and agreeing with them, on tickling their ears with sweet words.

On this All Souls – All Saints Day, you and I are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses from every century. Many of them were less than perfect souls. Many had followed faithfully the true prophets of God, while others, sadly, as we know from history, chose to follow the values and the ways of the false prophets. May we be strengthened for the sometimes hard but glorious work God calls us to, as we follow our ancestors in the path of descent; in the journey of self-emptying; in the cruciform way of Jesus Christ.

Our All Saints Memorial Garden contains the sacred remains of 156 members of this great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us. You and I would not be sitting here worshipping, actively learning and serving within and outside this church if it were not for these individuals who chose to follow God's faithful prophets; who chose to be faithful stewards of their many talents and gifts and resources; who chose to sacrifice and follow the way of the cross as they built and worked and served and gave in so many ways.

In gratitude to them and many others, let us pause for a time of silence as we remember and honor them, and ask them to strengthen us for the work that lies ahead as we follow our savior and prophet Jesus.

Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord.

Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.