

## All Saints 2023 (A) Matthew 5:1-12

This year I heard more dire warnings than usual about the dangers of Halloween, how Trick or Treat was like throwing a birthday party for Satan or some such nonsense. So last week there were a lot of “Fall Harvest Festivals” celebrated by people who thought they were offering a “Christian” alternative to Halloween...who are apparently unaware that Halloween is the Christian alternative to...fall harvest festivals. We’ve come full circle. As Christianity spread, especially in Europe, we got really good at taking over local traditions with the Christian holidays that were most like them. Scripture cites no date or even season of the year for Jesus’ birth, but since John’s gospel uses the metaphor of light dispelling darkness, why not observe Christmas around the winter solstice, when people were already celebrating the return of lighter days (in the northern hemisphere, of course)? Now, it’s true that our religious holidays have become secularized, but we don’t avoid Christmas because of Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer. So *Halloween—All Hallow’s Eve*—is the night before *All Hallows Day* or, as we now say, *All Saints Day*. The Church has commemorated the dead at the beginning of November at least as far back as the 9th century. Of course, back then there were no time zones, no daylight savings time, no trying to figure out how to set the clock on the microwave back an hour. But even though I realize I’m reading my modern experience into it, and that we moved this feast from the middle of the week to today, it still seems appropriate for All Saints Day to coincide with the first of our shortened days, when darkness arrives earlier, at 5:06PM.

While we are remembering the true meaning of Halloween, let’s also reclaim the word *saint*. We’ve developed the habit of using that word only to describe spiritual superstars: people who lived lives of miraculous faith; people who kept singing hymns as they were burned at the stake; at the very least, people who seem to graciously put up with the difficult people the rest of us try to avoid. But a *saint*, one who is *sanctified* or *holy* or *hallowed* just means one who is set apart, especially one who is set apart by God. But even that setting apart is not as exclusive as it sounds: saints are not only those whom God calls to undertake monumental tasks. In baptism, we *all* are set apart for godly living, and that usually doesn’t mean casting out demons, performing miracles, or being martyred; but it does involve the everyday work of being decent and loving to one another. So by that definition, God has already made all of us saints. (We’re all simultaneously sinners, too, but that’s a different sermon).

So today we think of the faithful who have gone before us, those who have feast days and churches named after them, those from the congregation who have died in this last year, but also all of those who have lived and died in faith; and we can count all of them among God’s saints even if we can’t point to anything miraculous they may have done. My grandfather died this

summer, and I don't know if anyone would call him a person of extraordinary faith. But I know that he joined the choir when he was 93, not because he was a great singer but because they needed volunteers. And I know that after I went to seminary and became a pastor and everyone else deferred to me any time any praying needed to be done, he still said grace over the meals we ate at his table. It's not just the extraordinary works of faith that God blesses; it's our ordinary lives as well.

That is Jesus' claim in the sermon on the mount: that God blesses the saints who are doing the everyday work of godly living, even if it doesn't always look like they—like we—are blessed. Some of the promises of these beatitudes are of future blessing: *they will be comforted, they will be filled, they will receive mercy, they will see God*. And those are good reminders of hope in God's future when we are overwhelmed by a world that never seems like it is getting better. But Jesus also says that we are blessed in the here and now—even in circumstances which wouldn't lead anyone to say we are *#blessed*. Jesus' list of who is blessed doesn't sound aspirational. The world doesn't look too kindly on the meek, unless it's to take advantage of them. Peacemakers are rare enough that there's a Nobel Prize for that, because we live in a world where war is so much more profitable. Our culture is so uncomfortable with death we don't mourn well—we try too hard to find silver linings or rush through grief—yet, if we're going to love as Jesus instructed us to, we're going to end up mourning when those loved ones die. We are not always going to be blessed by the standards of the world when we are living by the standards of God's kingdom; yet Jesus boldly claims that God is still faithful to us, working for us and in us and through us for the sake of others.

There was no football game Friday night, so I went to Shabbat worship. Rabbi Audrey's message was about the story of Abraham and Sarah, and we sang a song at the end of the service based on God's call to Abraham to leave his home and family and become the ancestor through whom God would bless all people. The word "blessing" jumped out to me in that song because I'd been reading the list of blessings in today's gospel, and I was reminded that we who are called to be ordinary, everyday saints, whose names will one day be remembered on a day like today, we are blessed when we bless others with lives lived in faith. I won't sing it or mispronounce the Hebrew, but let me leave you with the words of the song:

Go forth to a land that I will show you,

Go forth to a place you do not know,

Go forth, on your journey I will bless you,

And you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing, you shall be a blessing, go forth.