

“Blessings and Woes”
Based on Luke 6: 20-31
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church—November 7, 2010

Here we are—All Saints Sunday. Celebrating, remembering and honoring our loved ones who are no longer with us. Those whom we assume—or hope—have been taken up into the merciful arms of the Creator and are now in that “better place.” Those whom we hope to join one day. As the hymn goes, “Some glad morning when this life is o’er,/I’ll fly away./To a home on God’s celestial shore./I’ll fly away.”

In the Apostle’s Creed which we will use today and as we do on most communion Sundays, we say, “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” It’s interesting that this belief in the communion of saints is so important that it’s mentioned in the Apostles Creed and yet, we rarely talk about it. Maybe once a year for All Saints Day. Maybe. But where would we be without our saints? Not only the famous ones like Abraham and Sarah and all their descendents whose faithfulness form the foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures; not only the Marys, Apostles and Paul who ministered with Jesus in the New Testament; not only the famous fathers and mothers of the Christian faith throughout the ages; not only the famous modern day saints like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa; but also all the ordinary people throughout history, from early Christianity through to modern age who have been models of Christianity and formed foundations of churches and charitable living. “For all the saints who from their labors rest...”

But All Saints Day—like funerals and memorial services—isn’t really for the dead. It’s for those of us who remain. Those of us who grieve and will miss the loved ones the rest of our lives. I recently heard someone say, “It’s a lie that time heals all wounds.” And that’s probably true to an extent. We never “get over” the death of a loved one. But we can and hopefully we will, come to a kind of peace with the loss. We can come to be comforted by a sense that the person is with us as often as our memory conjures them up. Maybe time does not heal all wounds in the sense that the wounds completely disappear and are forgotten. But the wounds will scab and scar over if we let them. The wounds don’t have to remain gaping, bleeding and oozing.

How do we do that? How do we promote the healing? How do we honor those how are no longer with us? Look to the Beatitudes... What is the connection between the saints—the cloud of witnesses—and blessings and woes, turning the other cheek and loving enemies?

Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, epitomizes the Lukan theme of God’s preference for the poor which is throughout the Gospel. Long before Jesus speaks these words, this theme has been prominent in the Magnificat, that is the song Mary sings when she learns she will give birth to Jesus about God brining the down the mighty and lifting

the lowly, and filling the hungry with good thing and sending the rich away empty.¹ Then again, Jesus emphasizes God's concern with the poor in his first spoken words in Luke saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."²

In today's scripture Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." When Jesus says these words, he means it. He's talking about the literally poor. He's talking about the literally hungry. He's talking about the literally hated, defamed and reviled. And those of us who are not the poor, the hungry and the reviled, can't help but squirm a bit, especially when Jesus goes on to list the woes, "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Jesus goes on with a seemingly unconnected ideas, "But I say to you that listen, 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. Do to others as you would have them do to you." It seems to me that the connection is in the blessings. The poor, the hungry, the mourning are all blessed. But so are those who love their enemies. So are those who defy abuse not by fighting back or cowering away but by standing up to their abusers, defiantly offering the other cheek. Blessed to are those how give to those who ask without asking for repayment. Blessed are those who treat others as they would like to be treated.

New Testament scholar Elizabeth Johnson notes, "To be blessed is to have a special place in God's heart, not merely to be happy. If you want anything to do with Jesus or the God who sent him, Luke says, you had better go find the poor, the hungry, the captives, the blind. and the outcast, and join Jesus, as Jesus cares for them. The way we know *who* Jesus is, is to go *where* Jesus is, with the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed."³

This week when I was thinking about the passage and the connections the different sections have to each other as well as the connection to the holiday of All Saints Day, I was reminded of an exceptional woman and her exceptional parents. Amy Biehl was an American graduate student in South Africa on a Fulbright scholarship. In 1993, not long before apartheid was finally abolished, she was killed by an angry mob of rioting

¹ Luke 1: 46-55, especially verse 53

² Luke 4: 18-19

³ E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 239.

black youth. She died because she was white and in the wrong place at the wrong time. The tragic irony is that she was in South Africa helping to dismantle apartheid. She was killed by some of the very people she was there to help. Blessed are you when people hate you...

But the story doesn't end there. Five years later, her parents Linda and Peter Biehl traveled to South Africa to take part in the Truth and Reconciliation hearings. The four men who had been convicted of killing Amy were being considered for pardon. The Biehls spoke in favor of pardoning. They were convinced that these four individuals did not kill their daughter; apartheid killed her. They were convinced that it was what their daughter would want them to do. At the hearing, Peter Biehl said, "The most important vehicle of reconciliation is open and honest dialogue...we are here to reconcile a human life which was taken without an opportunity for dialogue. When we are finished with this process we must move forward with linked arms." This level of forgiveness is difficult for most of us to comprehend. Though I deeply admire their ability to love their neighbors and forgive the unforgivable, I can't help but wonder: if I were in that situation, could I be that forgiving? Could I be that true to Christ's teaching? Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...

But remarkably, that's not even the end of the story. The Biehls' talk of moving forward with linked arms was not just nice sounding rhetoric. They went on to start the Amy Biehl Foundation to serve the youth in townships, particularly the one in which Amy died, to develop and empower youth and discourage violence. Though Linda and Peter had once said they would not meet with the men who killed their daughter, eventually, two of them, Easy Nofomela and Ntebecko Penny, ended up on the doorstep of the Amy Biehl Foundation seeking assistance. Blessed are the poor... The Biehls met with the men, and formed an unlikely bond with them. The men received skills training through the foundation and went on to start a construction company with the help of the Biehls and the foundation. Peter Biehl said, "If [these men] make it, they are clear evidence to the new South Africa: Two people can pull themselves up from the very worst of possible situations and make something of themselves," he says. "That's [Amy's] dream. And I think that she's living that dream today, through these two guys."⁴ "Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you."

I love what someone posted on my Facebook page this week regarding All Saints Day: "Not all Saints are dead and you get to be a Saint for what you did. What are you doing? Not you specifically, but modern Saints."⁵ What *are* we doing to be blessed? To have a special place in God's heart? How are we heeding the blessings and woes of the Beatitudes? How are we honoring our dead with our lives?

In a little bit, we'll be taking Holy Communion. Whenever we take communion we are communing not only with the Triune God: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, but

⁴ http://www.celebritymemorials.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=48:victims&id=139:amy-biehl&Itemid=81

⁵ George Robertson

with the entire cloud of witnesses. We commune with all the saints: Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi, Peter and Paul, Mary and Martha, Martin Luther and John Calvin, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa, all our friends from this church including Anita, Audrey, Joe and Orma, as well as all our loved ones who have gone on to a home on God's celestial shore.