Since we began the Saints of Songwriting series today, I thought I'd begin with One of my favorite songwriters from when I was in college, a guy named Don Chaffer. He never hit the big time, hasn't sold a lot of albums, but I love his way with words. Admittingly, he has a penchant for saying important things in a way that is a bit crass….but it always hits home. It's almost as if his unpolished and rough way of speaking actually help to drive the point home….in a sense, the unpolished and crude is the point. His insights are unvarnished, no make-up and unembellished…they are real world insights…a bit rough around the edges. In one song, called "If you want to get free" ….he conjures up the story of Moses and the burning bush….but instead of Mount Horeb…his setting is a roadside filling station…The first verse goes like this:

In the gas station bathroom by the novelty machine
I heard the word of the Lord
He said "Take off your shoes
This is holy ground too
You know I came for the sick and the bored."
Beneath the selling of beers
And the welling up of tears
Out beyond the beam of the remote control
There's a whispering voice
That the humble ear ears
saying, just ask and you'll be made whole."

What hits me about this song, is the radical notion of just how commonplace the holy is. How pervasive it is. How the dirty, dare I say, disgusting gas station bathroom is transformed into a place where God speaks….and where God is heard. What also hits is the holy ground part….there are lots of places where I would take of my shoes…but this is not one of them. Frankly, that idea is a bit repulsive…..but what if there is a truth here…. It's almost as if he's saying that responding to God's call can be a messy business….it can be difficult and uncomfortable….it can be beautiful…but maybe not beautiful in the classical sense…maybe forgiveness isn't sterile, maybe loving your neighbor isn't always sanitary…what if pureness of

heart means that we acknowledge that our hearts are sometimes not the most hygienic of environments.

On first view, our Gospel lesson, the beatitudes, sound squarely opposed to this idea. They might even sound like a collection of trite aphorisms, or even a Pollyannaish depiction of the world…I mean don't we often treat the beatitudes this way? Don't we see #blessed on Instagram and facebook posts about trivial matters, and don't we, on the whole, often want our leaders to have backbone and chutzpah and bravado, to be the opposite of meek?, and Isn't there a pill for those who are poor in Spirit…and mercy…haven't we tried that before …and haven't we, at least societally, become increasingly accepting of our heroes, and our politicians shrugging off the Golden rule. Further, we may read blessed are the poor, but we don't want to join them… we may read blessed are the those who mourn…but in the midst our mourning we sure don't feel blessed.

Responding to this understanding of the beatitudes, Church of England bishop and scholar NT Wright puts it this way: Jesus is not suggesting that [the Beatitudes] are simply timeless truths about the way the world works or about human behavior. If he was saying that, he is simply wrong. Mourners often go uncomforted, the meek don't inherit the earth, those who long for justice often take that longing to the grave. What Jesus **is** doing is drawing a contrast between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of the world.

I want you to notice just how honest the beatitudes are, it's as if Jesus, like Don Chaffer, is acknowledging the imperfection of the world, the places the world is broken, the places where

real hurting occurs, the places and situations that we would wish away….poverty, hunger, mourning, persecution…all of these things are acknowledged….Jesus admits that they exist…..but he also insists that they exist alongside blessedness. He grants that poverty and mourning are part of reality…he doesn't deny their presence…instead he acknowledges their presence in and alongside blessings. He insists that reality can and must be understood as a place of contradiction, a place where life and death dance an awkward waltz, reality is understood as a place where healing and sickness coincide, a place where peace and war exist on opposite sides of imaginary lines. This is our world. Light and dark, love and hate, beautiful and broken.

And in this beautiful and broken world where we live, we often prefer to deny the brokenness, or least deny it's power…so instead we look for certainty, even if means that we reject reality or gloss over inconsistencies in certainty's façade. When the inconsistencies get to the point where they can't be denied, and It seems like everything in the world is dying or decaying or being worn down…we look for exceptions to the broken beauty….We look for something strong, undying, and infinite. Religion tells us that the "something" for which we search is God. But we've envisioned God as strong, complete, and all-powerful, unmoving, unchanging—in short, a God removed from suffering and pain….but In Jesus, God comes along to show us: "Even I suffer. Even I participate in the finiteness of this world. ….but know this, he says, you can meet me at the intersection of beauty and brokenness.

Franciscan Richard Rohr, puts it this way, in his usual and stirring way, and I quote "After two thousand years, Jesus is still a revolutionary symbol, revelation, and reality. He turned theology upside down and taught, in effect: *God is not who you think God is.* The enfleshment and

suffering of Jesus reveals that God is not apart from the trials of humanity. God is not aloof. God is not a spectator. God is not merely tolerating human suffering neither is GOd instantly just healing it. *God is participating with us in it*. Living it alongside us and with us." NOw That is what gives us eternal purpose and hope… Through encountering the Living God in our pain, we can experience another kind of life, another kind of freedom.

Pain and beauty constitute the two faces of God. On the one hand we are attracted to the unbelievable beauty of the divine reflected in the beauty of human beings and the natural world. On the other hand, brokenness and weakness also mysteriously pull us out of ourselves. We feel them both together.

Today, as we Keep the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls, we especially remember this fact that reality exists in tension. We remember those whom we love, but see no longer. We remember the good times of the past,. The sustaining memories of a freewheeling happiness….we remember times unburdened by grief…..but we also know the sting of death and separation…we also know the things aren't always as we would design them…we know that grief is hard but that it has also taught us hard lessons…we know loss, but we also know that loss is always preceded by some sort of love. We know reality.

So when you reread the beatitudes…try not read them as simply prescriptions for behavior, and don't read them as wide-eyed optimistic aphorisms either. Instead,. Read them as a hard-nosed, realistic insistence that there is beauty everywhere, it's there, even if it needs to hide its face from you for a moment…or better said, even if we attempt to hide our eyes from it.

Whatever you're going through, and all of us are going through something, what I hope you hear this morning is a real recognition of the difficulties of this life alongside a deep respect for the beauty of this life ….what I hope you see is that God is there with you, experiencing the depth of the pain….but also holding out hope and healing. What I'm noticing here, is that there is a resoluteness to blessedness, that holds fast in spite of the circumstances of life. Blessedness is a relational state…one that doesn't depend on us, but rather on God. In other words, we can experience relationship with God in the best and in the worst times, in the palace and in the gas station bathroom. We can find meaning and purpose, not because of suffering, but through it. Not because of Grief, but through it. Not because of persecution, but through it….and mysteriously, when we hold fast to our blessedness…when we stubbornly insist that we believe it….When we take Jesus at his word…then we begin to experience it….we begin to see it everywhere…and maybe, just maybe….we'll take off our shoes in the strangest of places.

Amen.