

## **Blessed are You**

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
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*All Saints – Year A*

Matthew 5:1-12



Blessed are you.

Let us pause in the silence to hear those words.

Blessed are you.

Let us allow them to wash over us, rolling down like waters, like a mighty stream.

Blessed are you.

Christ's intent here is to bless. His words are performative; they enact what they proclaim. With his words he blesses us, with these utterances a world is opened to us, one always present to us, but one we often miss, a world he calls the kingdom of God.

I think we miss the kingdom come all around us in part because we are blinded to its contours, blinded by the bright lights of a culture that equates kingdom with a certain kind of power, with violence, with stark demarcations of who is in and who is out, with ruthlessness, with grasping and accumulating. We bathe in these brackish waters every day, such that the kingdom of God slips by us.

But today, rolling down like so many baptismal waters, like a mighty stream, the waters in which we bathe all the time are disturbed and we see and hear and experience blessing, upsetting our cultural expectations with a pronouncement that God's kingdom is among us, here and now, inviting us to reorient our living, to receive the blessing Christ offers.

The blessing Christ pronounces for us today is life-giving and disruptive. In fact, it is in the disruption where we are given life. And it is disruptive to hear blessings on the poor in spirit, on the meek and the mourning, on the merciful and the peacemakers. That's not how the world works, and we know it; that's not how we live, and we know it. We are tempted to say, "Those blessings are not for me, not for us; they do not reflect my

posture in the world. Go away from me Jesus and take your blessing to someone, to some people, who are more deserving.”

But that’s the thing about blessing – it has nothing to do with worthiness. It is all about the grace of the one pronouncing the blessing. Christ doesn’t say, “You will be blessed if you become more merciful” or, “I will bless you if achieve being poor enough in spirit.” No, he simply says it, to them, to us, to his gathered community in all times and places, “You are blessed and beloved of God.”

Even as we hear and receive, we are invited into the paradox of blessing. In one of the podcasts put out by the church around the Beatitudes recently, Anne Keener reminded us that the blessings here are paradoxical. We see in these blessings ways of being in the world that push up against what we normally associate with words like mourning and mercy and meek and hungering and thirsting. We see the shape of an alternative as the blessing washes over us.

I was watching a documentary recently that was examining the state of politics in our nation. One of the interviews was with a current political operative. The interviewer asked this person, “So what would you say the ultimate purpose of politics is? Is it to bring people together?”

The person laughed and said, “No, the purpose of politics is not to bring people together. The purpose of politics is to win.”

When Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” we are invited to experience the disruption that such blessing causes in a world where politics is all about winning, where the earth is to be taken and exploited and owned. In experiencing the paradox, we can be reoriented to see differently, to imagine a world where the meek, or, as Linzi reminded us in her podcast, the gentle or the humble, display the kingdom of God, and we remember that, as Linzi said, “the earth is inherited, the earth is received, not taken or snatched. The land and its wealth must be oriented to others.”

There is room to breathe in such a blessing, to imagine that there is more to our existence than what is readily available to us, more than the sum of what our culture teaches us, that the kingdom of God is truly among us, transforming us, offering us another way to see, another path – life, abundant life.

We are about to have another Election Day. As I listen to people talk about it, regardless of their politics, the stake to each of us feel high. And they are. We are living

in a time when a pandemic that has taken 230,000 lives and left large swaths of our economy in tatters has made us feel isolated and fearful. We live in a time when long-standing racial inequalities have come to the fore in such a way that they must be faced and where unrest in the streets speak of a ferment for change. And we live at a moment when large segments of our population believe that if the other side wins, the nation will not recover.

This is where we are as we sit here today on All Saints Day.

And yet, those moments when I take the time to slow down and not just talk about the Republicans and the Democrats, about Trump and Biden, but ask the simple question, “Why is this important to you?” what I hear is a deep hunger for a country that flourishes, where everyone can live in safety and prosperity, where justice rolls down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And here’s the thing – those hungers and thirsts are not confined to one party. They are at the heart of what we are all of us searching for.

Mary Sellers reminded us in her podcast that righteousness is closely related to justice, and that the hunger and thirst for righteousness that Jesus blesses is a longing for the world to be made right. Is that not what lies at the root of our national ferment?

I remember when I came to this church in the summer of 2004, we were heading into an election that fall. We decided to have a debate during Wednesday Night Live between Hugh DuPree, representing one candidate and Jim Mahurin representing the other. It was a wonderful evening, in large part because the friendship and affection they shared was obvious even though they differed sharply in their politics. But the things I remember standing out the most was how beautifully laid out why they believed as they did, how they gave voice to the hunger and thirst that lay at the heart of their political commitments.

We are at our best when we remember that we are all of us blessed by God and that we belong to God. We are at our best when we remember that God is God, and we and our various ideologies and parties and candidates are not. And yet, the kingdom of God is among us, inviting us to imagine a life of flourishing that does not come from any election, but rather when we receive the gift of blessing and find ourselves transformed.

As we gather on All Saints in this tumultuous time, I am reminded of the words of David Lose, who says that “part of what we do when we celebrate All Saints is to participate in the inversion of the kingdom of the world, which believes that all we can see, hold, control, or buy is all there is.” Just as those who have died in this world are not

lost to us, but live in the nearer presence of God, so God's kingdom exists now, exerts its influence on us now, transforms our reality now.

God's love and life are more powerful and enduring than the hate, disappointment and death that seems at times to surround us.

We believe that the saints of God experience now in fullness, see now in total, what we only glimpse. They shine with the sun of God's blessing. They cheer us on.

And here we are. You may be feeling tired, confused, cynical, unsure, incapable. You may not see yourself as particularly blessed. But the miracle of grace is that you are. Blessed are you. You are beloved of God. You are linked with all the saints in precisely this – the grace of God.

My prayer this day is that you, me, all God's beloved, would lift our hands and receive the blessing, and then go in the strength of that blessing to bless the world. Amen.