

ALL SAINTS – November 1, 2020
SCRIPTURES – Psalm 31; 1 John 3:1-3; Rev. 7:2-17; Matt. 5:1-12

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Mt. 5

Each of our Scripture readings today begins in a similar way. 1 John 3 begins, **“See what kind of love the Father has given to us...”** Matt. 5 begins, **“Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up...”** And, we will soon hear the apostle John say in Rev. 7, **“Then I saw another angel...”** God wants us to open our eyes and see!

What do we see here? Listed on the next page in your bulletin are the names of seven people we no longer see. And yet, I can still see them.

- Barbara Andreassen. On Christmas Eve she would sit with her mother and husband right up front, then after the Service she would stand in front and gaze upon the Christmas Tree. Last February she sat in the front pew by herself, with her walker next to her.
- Bob Burgess. Every week for years you could see him, sitting in the second row. You could hear him, too, loudly singing the hymns – often, the tenor line.
- Eleanor Hegedus. Years ago she would sit in the very back left with her husband and adult son. I remember the concerned look on her face the time when her husband collapsed during a Service. In her last years she, with her son, sat before me in her home, hunched over in a wheelchair.
- Al Shandrowski. He always sat with his family near the front and on my left – unless he was standing in the back and handing out bulletins, or lighting the aisle candles on Christmas. Ever-present, but quiet and unassuming – that was Al.
- Carl Thane sat right up front, but mostly at the Sat. evening Service. His last years he spent sitting in a wheelchair in a nursing home. But, almost every time I saw him, he told me, “I pray for you every day, Pastor.”
- Bob V. The Chief! When he sat, it was a third of the way back, on the center aisle. He mostly stood: handing out bulletins... helping distribute Communion... picking up afterward.
- Peter Winters was an occasional presence. He suffered for years with mental illness, and I rarely knew where he was. When he came he would sit up front and listen. I can see him now, eagerly reaching out for Holy Communion.

We will not see these people sitting here again. And, look around: we see that many who normally would be here are yet not here. See what the fear of disease is doing. Look and see: there is separation, between us here and from us here, on this day.

And so, on this day the Lord of heaven and earth... the Lord Jesus who fills heaven and earth, and so brings them together... says: SEE WHAT I SEE! See it, for what our Creator and Savior sees He also causes to be, now and forever.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This first blessing, or beatitude, of Jesus undergirds all the others. So: what is Jesus saying? The poor in spirit: who is Jesus blessing?

Is Jesus talking about being weak in faith? Uncertain, and not confident? Well... how could that be a blessing? Does poor in spirit mean mentally struggling... like Peter Winters with mental illness? That is more of a curse than a blessing. Is Jesus talking about people who walk around with their heads down... unsure of themselves, always seeing the downside and saying, “I can’t”... discouraged, and discouraging, people? We can certainly see why such people would be seen as mourning... as meek... and be hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for change. But, blessed?

There’s really no blessing in depression or lack of confidence, is there? This may describe some of Christ’s people, but not most. It certainly doesn’t describe Bob Burgess, or Bob V, or Barbara Andreassen, or even quiet and unassuming Al Shandrowski. And, this is not what Jesus commends when He pronounces the poor in spirit blessed.

When Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, He is not seeing and blessing an attitude. He is seeing and blessing those struggling with the reality of sin; with a real lack – a poverty, even – of spiritual resources and abilities. Christ’s blessed ones, His poor in spirit, are lowly, weak, and helpless sinners; sinners who know that that their very thoughts and desires are rotten through and through and so taint and corrupt all that they think and say and do!

How, you might wonder, can this be seen as a blessing? How can knowing your sins bring the blessedness of heaven’s kingdom, of God’s rule? After all, it really doesn’t seem to, does it? An awareness of your sinfulness brings dissatisfaction with your faith, and with your life as a Christian. It brings an awareness of your shortcomings and shortfalls – especially when you know that God is far more aware of them than you! It brings worry about whether you will be one of those standing before God’s throne, clothed in a white robe and singing His praises. An awareness of your sin brings not only the fear of separation; it brings actual separation. It causes us to shy away from God, and divides us from one another.

- How many people in the pews don’t you know because you don’t care to know them and make no effort to know them?

Sin divides us in life, and it results in death – which surely divides us. How can this be a blessing?

The blessing is in knowing that Jesus came, not to condemn and stand apart from such sinners, but to draw so near to them and their sins that He made them His own and bore their punishment Himself. He came to be the God and Savior of sinners, and only of sinners, and by His horrible death upon a cross free them from every lowliness their sins bring. It is not your spiritual strength, your certainty of faith, that saves you but Christ’s sacrifice for you! He is the kingdom of heaven, and He came to us in our weak flesh – and in the lowliness of simple words, water, and bread and wine

He still comes – to offer Himself to you. Through faith alone – even the lowliest, merest faith – all that is His – heaven’s kingdom itself – is yours!

Jesus’ apostle John – who heard Jesus pronounce these blessings, and who saw Him be crucified, and then rise to life again – says, “**See what kind of love the Father has given to us,**” – to us who do not say we have no sin, but who admit it and confess to being poor in spirit – “**that we should be called children of God; and so we are.**” (1 John 3:1) And so we are. Believe it, and God will open your eyes to see it. We are beloved children of the eternal Father! And so are those we love who confessed Him with us, and are now no longer among us. They have been taken out of this tribulation and so are no longer weak in flesh and poor in spirit like us, but are clothed with the robe of Christ’s righteousness and utterly filled with the almighty Spirit of holiness. Rejoice and be glad for them, and join them in crying out with thanks and praise, “**Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!**” In the blessed name of Jesus. Amen.