

Matthew 5:1-12

From Tears to Joy

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

All Saints' Day, November 1, 2020

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When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the realm of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the realm of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us: Thanks be to God.

There’s a story behind this font. Yes, as many of you know, it was created by Giuseppe Moretti, the same sculptor who made the statue of Vulcan that watches over the City of Birmingham. The font was placed here in 1907, and some of you recall the celebration of its hundredth anniversary, when a scroll listing the names

of all those who had been baptized here was laid at the foot of the font, and unfurled down the whole length of the center aisle, out the door, and down the steps to the street.

What a great way to celebrate all the lives that have been touched since this font was given! But behind this font is a story of personal sorrow.

It was given to the church by Rebie Berney Evans in 1907, and along the edges of the basin it reads: In memory of my father, mother, and their babies: Juliet, William, Charles Linn, and then one so young that it hadn't even received a name. All it says is "baby".

Rebie Evans' mother had lost her own mother at an early age, and had a special tenderness toward children who were motherless. Her dream had been to endow an orphanage but this, she was unable to do. Then, Rebie says in our church's history of *Woman's Work*, "Suffering the loss of four little children, she wanted to place in our church a baptismal font to their memory." This was accomplished after her death, when Rebie gave the font in memory of both of her parents, and of the four babies who would have been Rebie's own siblings.¹

¹ Mary McLeod McNeill, ed. *Woman's Work of the Presbyterian Church* (Birmingham, AL: Woman's Auxiliary) 33.

So, Rebie's mother was a child who had lost her mother, and a mother who had lost four children. Imagine the grief that whole family experienced, over and over through the years, and how overwhelming it must have been.

And now, think of that whole scroll of names unfurling to the street. Year upon year and name upon name of joyful parents, standing here at this font to bless their new children; and think of all the faces in the congregation beaming on, each time, with love, as they made their own promises to help raise those children in the faith.

“Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus said, “for they will be comforted.”

Today is All Saints' Day. This church has known many saints. Each of us, in our own lives, has known many saints. If we hadn't, we wouldn't be here—because *someone* had to share the faith with us!

But what *is* a saint? My stepdad likes to refer to his late mother as “My sainted mother, who was no saint.” It's a joke—there's no deep, dark, family secret there (at least, not that I'm aware of!). All he means is that she was no plaster icon, float serenely above the world with a halo hovering. Instead, she was a tiny, feisty Sicilian woman who weathered any number of struggles with deep faith, while remaining quirky and loving and entirely human.

If we take Jesus' words in the Beatitudes as a list of the qualities that make a saint, what we see is all the vulnerability of being human. The ones he's blessing are not the perfect people, but the people who know they are on a learning curve—those who approach life with humility. And these are not the people who float above the earth, but those who are fundamentally, viscerally invested in the earth and its suffering.

So: the blessings that Jesus names are not for the spiritually sure, but for the spiritually poor, who know that they need God; not for those whose lives are one triumph after another, but for those who have suffered losses—because to mourn means that you have loved.

The blessings are not for those who are infallible, but for the meek, who know their own limitations; not for those who wield all the power, but for those who hunger and thirst for the rights of others; not for those who sit in judgment, but for those who offer mercy; not for the jaded, but for the pure in heart who still believe in goodness; not for the heavily guarded, but for those who will set down their weapons and seek peace; not for the ones who get all the accolades, but for the ones who will risk ridicule and abuse in order to further the realm of God. These are the blessed ones. Human and humbled and wounded. These are the saints.

Of course, it's not the woundedness that makes a saint. Woundedness is just an inevitable outcome of our mortality. There isn't a person on this planet who hasn't been wounded—and the wound, itself, is not the source of the blessing.

Instead, the blessing comes from how we respond to our wounds. There are those who respond to pain by becoming bitter and cynical and vengeful. I don't, for a minute, think that those who march with tiki torches or who separate families and lock children in cages or who spread hateful, racist lies on the internet do so because they are brimming over with joy. Somewhere along the way, they have been hurt. They have been damaged. In response, they have turned hard and angry, projecting that hurt and damage outward onto others.

But the blessed respond by softening toward others. Like Rebie's orphaned mother, longing to create a home for other motherless children; and, grieving the children whom she could no longer embrace, wanting to offer a font of blessing for the children of others.

Every one of the Beatitudes is an example of those who use their own weaknesses, their own hurts, to connect to the wellbeing of others. Those who use their tears to water the seeds of joy.

This has been a year of loss for all of us. Our church has had to say goodbye to seven of our members. Many of us have had to say goodbye to members of our own families. We've all had to say goodbye to pretty much everything that counts as normal—worshipping side-by-side in these pews, singing, handshakes and hugs, playdates and family gatherings; we all have reasons to mourn.

What will we do with all that grief? Will we bottle it up and use it to build a wall of resentment? Will we lash out in anger and trample on others to get the rights of normalcy we've been denied? Or will we let it soften us, open us, fill us with compassion for all the hurting souls of this world, the poor ones for whom loss is all they've ever known?

There are no plaster saints. There are only human saints. Flesh and blood saints. Saints on a learning curve of love, stumbling and falling and getting up; saints with band-aids on their shins and scars on their souls.

Saints whose hurts have helped them see beyond themselves to a hurting world. And in that, there is blessing. Because the more we are connected in love to this world, the more we are connected to the one who loves this world.

The same one whose heart breaks open like a loaf of bread, whose grace pours out like wine, whose arms spread wide to take us all in.

He knows all about the tears. And he knows how to take those tears and use them, transforming them into a font of blessing and joy for us, and for everyone who comes after. Thanks be to God.