

All Saints' Sunday, Year C
Daniel 7:1-3,15-18; Psalm 149;
Ephesians 1:11-23; Luke 6:20-31

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November 3, 2019

Mary Oliver, the beloved American poet who died earlier this year, wrote this delightfully succinct poem a few years ago, entitled, "Don't Worry."

Things take the time they take. Don't
worry.
How many roads did Saint Augustine follow
before he became Saint Augustine?¹

I suppose we might think of our gospel text today from Luke in terms of worry, here on this All Saints' Sunday when we remember Augustine among countless others. Jesus' Sermon on the Plain comes in the beginning of a long dialogue just following the calling of the twelve apostles.² And in this text, we hear life turned on its head. Those things that we might consider bad are actually blessings, the poor and the hungry and the mournful shall receive a heavenly reward. But some of us ought to worry! Those of us who are rich, full, laughing – well, the Author of Luke's Gospel doesn't actually say what happens to us, but we might read between the lines.

So on the surface, Jesus' Sermon on the Plain seems to do what that not-so-old adage about religion tells us: today we comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.³ Even granting that each of us is a little bit poor in some way, a little bit hungry, a little grief-stricken, this text challenges most of us. If I were to look at each list of attributes – poor, hunger, weeping, against being rich, full, and laughing, I know which one I'd pick – until I see which one is blessed and which one ought to feel the deep sting of woe.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we recognize – well, we remember all the faithful, throughout age and place. That includes us, and it includes the first Christians, and all those who we love who shaped us in the Church but no longer walk this world alongside us. The earliest Christians considered "saints" to be all believers living and dead, though this day has come to recall those who have died having led lives of remarkable faith and actions.

¹ Mary Oliver, *Felicity* (Penguin Press, 2015), 3.

² In a brief account, Jesus calls the twelve apostles: Luke 6:13-16; Jesus then speaks to a vast crowd and heals those in need: Luke 6:17-19.

³ This millennial was unaware that this saying actually originated in journalism rather than religion; its application to Christianity is quite modern: <https://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>

So particularly, we remember today people like St. Augustine – and here, you should fill in your favorite saint or other person who has influenced your own faith. We recognize quite a few in the opening pages of our prayer book, and a number of others have been added to our Episcopal Church calendar in subsequent years and more books than I can keep up with. In other words, we have no shortage of people to remember on this day, some so well known to the church their names appear in a book, some known only to us, some known to God alone. All are worthy of having ribbons tied to our altar rail in their name in just a few minutes.

But if this day is about those who have led remarkable, notable lives of faith, where does that list of woes and blessings fit in? Or, how might our lives intersect with the saints and what Jesus teaches us today?

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Our temptation is to look at the lives of the saints, to hear stories and read biographies, and expect tales of perfection. Us ordinary folk could not possibly measure up to these luminaries! But of course, that's exactly wrong. Even a brief account of Augustine's life, to look at just one example, presents us with a long list of failures of faith, among, well, some other things. We remember people like Augustine not for their perfections but for those many roads they take, for all the times they, like we, miss the mark. These misses are what place us in that category of those who need healing, those who need the blessings God promises us.

In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is surrounded by and looks up to “a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people. ... They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.”⁴ So the audience of this text is decidedly people who would respond to Jesus' promise of blessing.

But very few people fall absolutely into one category or another. I think of my brief time in a shanty town in northern Ghana, filled with people who are poor and hungry beyond my understanding – and then I remember the laughter reverberating in the darkness throughout the meager metal sheds. “Woe to you who are laughing now”⁵ is not the verse that comes to mind, then or today.

And equally, each moment in our lives does not represent the entirety of our blessings. The people who surround Jesus as he preached these words we hear today, these people of great faith but diseases of all kinds, poverty and hunger and sorrow and rejection – these people came to Jesus to receive healing, and Luke tells us that's exactly what happened. Are we to believe that in the moment of healing, these people of great faith received all the reward they could expect?

That is where the lives of the saints are relevant, why we devote a day each year in remembrance of All Saints, individually and as that great cloud of witnesses who surround us in our own journey. Collectively we see that people of great faith come from all kinds of backgrounds, all sorts of experiences and successes and failures. Throughout it all, they each found a way to be a blessing, to

⁴ Luke 6:17a, 18a.

⁵ Luke 6:25b.

embody the goodness of God and share God's love throughout the ages. And when we look at them like *that*, well, we just might see ourselves there, too.

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