



2020 ODNW Investiture—Readings for the Feast of All Saints

MATTHEW 5:1-12

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 kingdom 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 kingdom 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."

One of the most memorable and foundational moments of my seminary education occurred in my homiletics class during my middle year in school. The professor teaching the course had a bit of a reputation because he liked to challenge the theology in his student's sermons by asking them embarrassingly pointed questions in front of the entire class. These very pointed questions concerned what a person really believed, what a person had staked both their sermon and perhaps their life in making the decision to attend theological school.

One day a man in my class preached a sermon on one of the versions of the Beatitudes, that section in the Gospel of Matthew or in the Gospel of Luke that begins with "Blessed are..." in which Jesus describes the upside down realm of God, a realm in which the poor or the poor in spirit, not the rich, are blessed, in which those who mourn will know comfort, in which the meek, not the bold and adventurous, will inherit the earth, and on and on. In other words, the realm of God is a realm that God graciously creates, and through God's graciousness, we are invited to inhabit it.

The preacher, probably out of perplexity about what to do with the Beatitudes, had decided to focus on those behaviours that he believed should be characteristic of those inhabiting God's realm. Behaviors such as giving to the poor, comforting those who mourn, being merciful to others, making peace, fighting for justice, all of which the Beatitudes *seem* to reference. And so the sermon detailed all the things we each need to *do* as Christian people as we seek to inhabit the realm of God that Jesus came to proclaim.

After the sermon, we all offered our feedback to the preacher about his words and his delivery. To tell you the truth, I remember *absolutely nothing* about the feedback I or others gave.

At some point, however, our homiletics professor couldn't contain himself any longer. As he spoke, he addressed not just the preacher but all of us.

"Listen, people," he said, "This is not a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps religion, a religion that you have to earn your way into. The purpose of a sermon is not to exhort others to earn their way into a relationship with God through their good behavior. No, the love of God is like a net stretching across the universe, and in our baptism, we are gathered into that net. It isn't possible, no matter what we do, to earn our way into that net and, I believe, it isn't possible, no matter what we do, to fall our way out of that net."

"Blessed are you," he said to all of us, "and blessed are they, your listeners. Do you get it? If you do, go and preach that! And let any comments about your or their behavior come out of being caught up first in that net!"

At the time I had thought—how rude, how mean. How dare he embarrass one of us or all of us in this way! At the same time, I was also thinking: "Eek! I thought Christian life was all about good actions on behalf of others!"

But later, over the years during the many times I felt alone, or afraid or unworthy or irredeemable or cut off from God and from others, I have clung to those words. The love of God is like a net, strung across the universe. It is isn't possible to earn our way into that net. It isn't possible to fall out of that net. And so we are blessed, even when we were poor or poor in spirit, even when we were in mourning. We are blessed even when we were meek and speechless in the face of those who love the sounds of their own voices. We are blessed.

Today we're celebrating a group of people in the Diocese of New Westminster who have given themselves to the life of the Church in their parishes and at the diocesan and the national levels. As a part of this celebration, we will get to hear citations read that detail the many, many actions each person has taken during their time in the Church, actions that have, without a doubt, contributed to the life and witness of the Church in this place and beyond this place.

Let there be no mistake about it—I and those gathered here today are deeply grateful for those actions. This is because those actions are actions of holy sacrifice: offerings of time and energy and imagination, precious gifts offered to God and God's people.

But even more important than this, the people we are honouring today are people who over many, many years have lived richly and fully within the net that is the love of God, a net that, yes, does spur those who live within it to actions of love, of mercy, of comfort and of compassion and justice-making. But it is a net that also holds us fast during the times when we are incapable of putting one foot in front of another, during the times when we are inhibited from doing much on account of a pandemic, during the times when we are perplexed into pausing on account of the complex issues of

racial justice that keep emerging in the world around us, during the times when all we believe we can do is close our eyes and do our best to breathe.

This is what our Church and the people we honour today are all about—they are a community of people who have been and continue to be an important part of that net of God’s love stretching across the universe gathering others into itself, a net that we don’t earn our way into. A net that, God be praised, no matter what we do, we cannot fall our way out of.

During these times many of the good things we are accustomed to doing in the church have been paused, and we have been left for a time with simply considering who we really are, who we really are in the face of pandemic and the ongoing issues in the world related to race and justice. It would be easy to think that we have lost our way when in a sense our hands have been tied. But today I want to tell you that this time has also presented us with the opportunity to remind ourselves about what is at the base of this religion, this Christian faith, of ours.

We are not a pull-yourself-up-by-your bootstraps religion. For all the good work that many in this room have done, we are not a people who stand before God thinking that these good works will somehow secure for us a place in the realm of God. No, we know that God creates God’s realm through a relentless and unstoppable love for us and for the world. And that all we have done and that all we will do are the result of an answering love, the result of our grateful and answering love. Thank you, ODNW recipients, for all the many things that have flowed from your answering love,



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