

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Promises To Build On: Service

Matthew 5:1-12

Sunday, November 5, 2023

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Sitting in church one Sunday morning, I heard the preacher talking about saints. I got my mother's attention and asked, "Who are the saints?" This happened while the preacher was preaching. My mother looked frantically around and put a finger over my mouth so I wouldn't ask any more questions before she could satisfy my curiosity. Finally, she said, "Saints are people who let the light in."

Undoubtedly, that idea came to her because the sanctuary we were in was lined with stained glass windows. The windows had images of the 12 apostles, and each was labeled as a saint. Each apostle had a little halo depicted above their head, so it was easy to identify them. They were made of red, blue, green, and other colored glass. The light from outside came through them, illuminating the sanctuary with traces of red, blue, green, and other hues. They let the light in. That phrase did more than satisfy my four-year-old curiosity. It has stayed with my imagination over the years.

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." We often describe our lives as Christians as living in the light of God's love. Saints let the light shine through their living. They help us see how to live the good news of loving God and our neighbors.

I was reminded of my mother's definition of a saint this week while reading our first scripture lesson for today, that passage from Revelation 7. As John is shown around God's throne, he sees a group of people in robes worshipping before God and is asked, "Who are these?" John quickly turns the question back to the questioner, "Surely, you know!" It's like John is saying, "I'm not about to touch that one." I wonder sometimes if John was surprised by who these people were. Did he recognize them and wonder, "How did that person get in here? Who are these people?"

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth was once asked, "Will we see our loved ones in heaven?" Barth responded, "Oh yes, and the others too." Did John see the person

who constantly annoyed him in church and wonder, "How is that person here?" Did he see someone he had often passed on the street and never saw in church? Was he surprised to learn that this person was a Christian? Who are these?

We gather today to name saints who have let the light of God's love shine in our lives. We give thanks for them. We also gather, remembering that saints don't always fit our preconceptions. We are sometimes surprised to learn who they are. Many saints do simple acts of service that often go unnoticed and unrecognized. But as our second scripture reading reminds us, God notices what we often think is strange or weird and calls it blessed, holy, saintly.

### **The reading is from Matthew 5:1-12:**

<sup>1</sup>When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. <sup>8</sup>"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed, blessed, blessed. Nine times Jesus says it. It's like there's an abundance of blessings. The Greek word that we translate as blessed originally meant the happy state of the gods, living above earthly suffering and

labor. It's still how we often use the term today when someone says, "I am blessed." That usually means things are going well, or the person may have escaped some tragedy. We often talk about those honored and admired in our society as the ones who are blessed.

The nine groups Jesus calls out as blessed are very different from that use of the word. Jesus says those who mourn, the ones who are merciful, the ones persecuted and ridiculed for their faith in Christ are the blessed. His use of the term reminds us how different the values of God's kingdom are from the kingdoms of this world. We often see people in the conditions Jesus describes and think they are being punished or their situation is a sign of God's displeasure with them. But these people are pronounced as blessed for living for God's kingdom in the here and now. Who are these people?

Rosalie Guy was my Sunday school teacher for almost six years. Most Sundays, I was the only kid in her class. On high-attendance Sundays, there were three of us. Yet every Sunday, Ms. Guy showed up prepared as if she expected to see 50 kids in her class. She helped me learn to read by having me read part of the lesson each week. She complimented me on how I knew the Bible and could tell Bible stories. I was the only kid in the class, the pastor's son, and said, "I pretty much have to know this stuff." She would always smile and say, "Yes, but you enjoy it, and you are good at it."

I am convinced that I would not be here as a pastor today if it were not for Ms. Guy. So, if you've been trying to figure out who to blame, there it is.

Most people knew Ms. Guy as a widow who worked as a cashier at the local Belk's store. She was meek, not a mover and shaker in our community. Many people may not have noticed her at all. To me, she was the best Bible teacher ever, had the patience of Job and greater knowledge than Solomon. To me, she shined the light of how to hunger and thirst for righteousness into my life, and I have no doubt that God knew her as one of the blessed.

The word saint is used in the New Testament to describe all Christians. It is not reserved for just a few, the super Christians who stand out from the rest of us. Nor is it reserved for those who have died. Paul addresses most of his letters to churches with the salutation, "to the saints who are in..." Addressing

one another as saints was a recognition that we are made holy by God's work in and through us. It's what those figures John is asked about in Revelation sing about, "salvation belongs to our God." Saints let the light in because God changed their lives.

For Paul, saints are those who have been sanctified, have been made right with God, and live their lives in love with God and their neighbors. Jesus calls them the blessed. They are the ones who work for peace when we are often told it is useless; there will never be peace in our world. They are the ones who are merciful amid cries for revenge. They are the ones who are meek, though our culture often rewards the self-serving and aggressive. They are the ones who live their lives in light of God's values and priorities and allow the light of God's love to cast hues of grace into our world.

As we light candles today for those saints who have gone before us, part of what we give thanks for is their service, the actions and works they did while they were living. As part of our membership vows, we too, have promised to support the church with our service. May the light they shine into our lives lead us to build on the promise to serve God and our neighbor through the church.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.**





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