11.2.25 Sermon Transcript – Matthew 5:1-12

So I can remember a couple of appointments ago when I was still at Dunbar United Methodist Church and I did a lot of work with the kids there. One Sunday, it may have been All Saints Sunday for all I know - one of the kids asked me, what is a saint? And for whatever reason I was not quite ready for that question. On the fly I thought, well, how do I define a saint? So I started out by saying, “Well, a saint is someone who shows what God's love looks like. “And the kid said, “Okay, so somebody who's really good.” I said, “Well, no, not, not really, because saints are far from perfect people.”

I mean, we might think ofthe saints in history and we think of them as these really set apart people who were somehow more special or more holy than anybody else. But if you look at the very first saints of the church, you have people like St. Peter who denied Jesus three times in Jesus’ most desperate hour. You have St. Paul who used to arrest, persecute, and kill Christians. And yet, they are still saints of the church. What in the world is a saint? I think that's a question that I'm still wrestling with today because saints are not perfect people.

Nadia Bolz Weber, a well-known Lutheran pastor, says this, “I don't think what we celebrate in the saints is a particular human being's particular capacity to be saintly. I think we celebrate God's ability to do beautiful redeeming things through very flawed people because that's all God ever has to work with.” And I really like that definition of a saint – God's ability to do beautiful, redeeming things through very flawed people because that's the only material God's got to work with.

At least a couple of years ago during Lent, we did a book study of Nadia Bolz Weber's Accidental Saints. In this book she writes about how she didn't set out to be holy. She wasn't trying to be this, this high and mighty person – that instead she was first called to ministry in the midst of the recovery community. She found her call amongst recovering addicts, and drag queens, and cranky parishioners. She says, “We are a people who swear too much, doubt too often, and somehow keep bumping into grace.”

Saints are people who keep bumping into grace. One of the stories that she tells in this book is the story of Scotty, who was a young man from her congregation who died from an overdose. He'd been a part of her Denver church House for All Sinners and Saints, which was kind of an eclectic sort of faith community. It was full of recovering addicts ,and skeptics, and seekers, and when Scotty died, his mother asked Nadia to lead the funeral, and she really felt pretty terrified. Like, what could she possibly have to say in this moment when there was so much rawness and grief that came with Scotty's death?

And so at the funeral, the sanctuary was filled with all of Scotty's friends, some of whom were still users - it was filled with a lot of people who, the world might say don't really look like they belonged in church, but, she said, belonged there perfectly. And so she, in that moment, stood in front of that congregation and told them the truth, that Scotty's death was not God's will, that addiction is cruel, but that God's grace still clings to every person, no matter how broken. And this

is the part that really stuck out to me in this story as she told it, she told those folks there, “God doesn't decide who is in and who is out. God just keeps reaching into the graves we dig for ourselves and pulling us out over and over again.”

So today, on All Saints Day, we recognize that God is one who does keep reaching down for us in the midst of our graves, over and over again, giving us the promise of resurrection. The sanctuary is filled with a visual testimony to that resurrection. And that crowd that Nadia spoke to at Scotty's funeral? That's really the same crowd that in our text we heard this morning that Jesus calls blessed. That's the blessed crowd. When Jesus opened his mouth up on that mountainside, he wasn't handing out awards to the spiritual winners. He was announcing that God's blessing lands upon the ones whom no one expects, the ones who the world would call hopeless, or complicated, or too much, or not enough. All Saints Day is not about perfect people. It's about accidental saints – ordinary human beings, broken, flawed, imperfect, who bump up against God's grace.

I love this passage of the Beatitudes. It's the start of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, chapters five through seven in Matthew's Gospel, and in this sermon, Jesus reveals the heart, the nature of the kingdom of God, and he starts it all with these Beatitudes. The kingdom is revealed as a place that runs not on merit, but on mercy. It runs not on competition, but on connection. Each line, each beatitude that we heard this morning contrasts this divine reality with the systems that we inhabit.

The first Beatitude we hear is “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” You know, our current reality, the world in which we live, says self-sufficiency and our status define our worth. But the Beatitude reminds us that dependence upon God is strength, recognition that we don't have to be all the things to be loved, to be valued, to be of worth.

We hear, “Blessed are those who mourn. “So often in our world, at least I know for me, it is a temptation that whenever I'm struggling or having a hard time, I push it down and I soldier on and I say, “I am okay.” I don't have time to deal with this or to feel this grief. We rush past pain, or we try to suppress it. We call lament weakness, or we feel like because we're grieving and we can't do all the things all the time, that we are somehow not worthwhile enough. But God says, “Blessed are those who mourn,” because grief is actually like sacred protest, and it opens up space for comfort. Whether we are mourning the realities of the world or whether we're mourning the loss of relationships or things that are of significance to us in our lives. To grieve and to dwell in grief in a state of mourning is actually a sacred space.

“Blessed are the meek.” In our world, power dominates, and conquers, and silences. We live in a world that values domination and seeks to live it out. But blessed are the meek. Power is actually exercised in gentleness, in care, in tenderness towards one another.

“Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness.” There are many things that we might hunger for, whether it is the next step up on the rung, whether it's for profit, for comfort, or even for distraction. But Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness.” And what he means there is that justice and right relationship are what we seek. We're not talking just spiritual hunger

here. Jesus, I think, is also talking to those who know the pain of real and physical hunger, because in that hunger, they know that the world is not right; that there is something wrong when hunger exists, when not every human being is able to be fed. Jesus says, blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, who hunger for doing what is right, and for making sure that all experience the fulfillment of basic human needs.

“Blessed are the merciful.” Mercy. That's a hard concept in our world today, where vengeance, repaying, payback seem to be the dominant motivation for so many things. But Jesus says, blessed are the merciful because forgiveness and mercy actually rebuild human connection.

“Blessed are the pure in heart.” You know, cynicism, and I struggle with cynicism these days, blinds us to the possibilities of holiness and goodness. But blessed are the pure in heart, those whose undivided love allows us to see God's presence everywhere, who aren't wearing glasses so jaded that we can no longer see the presence or the goodness of God in our world or in our neighbors. I don't know about you, but I am really good at getting caught up into the negativity of the news cycle. And it's really hard to get out of that. I get really pessimistic and cynical. But Jesus reminds me, “Look to see where my love is. Look and see where goodness is occurring.
Look and see where there is mercy and justice being practiced. See those things so you can see me.” Blessed are the pure in heart.

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” Peacemakers – not the same thing as peacekeepers. Peacekeeping is just keeping everybody calm enough so there's no big blowups. But it's often a false sense of peace, or it's the kind of peace that says, “As long as we keep you over here and you over here, and never the two shall meet, we're good.” That's division, though. That is not true peace. But Jesus says, blessed are the peacemakers, the ones who work for, who strive to build bridges, who enact reconciliation. Reconciliation is a key defining characteristic of what it means to be a part of God's family. It's a key and defining characteristic of the nature of God's kingdom.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness in our world today.” Those who disturb the status quo, who challenge the way things are, are silenced. But Jesus says, suffering for love, for care of the vulnerable, for love of God and love of neighbor, is in fact participation in the life of Christ and in the life of God's kingdom. In these 12 short verses, we have this grand reveal of God's kingdom where we see God's kingdom already breaking in through people who live out these truths.

And living that out sometimes comes by accident, often in imperfection. Again, a saint is someone who keeps bumping up against God's grace over and over again. Nadia Bolz Weber says “God's kingdom isn't made up of the shiny and the triumphant. It's made up of the broken and the brave.” In her book, she writes about a recovering addict who sponsors another newcomer, poor in spirit, yet rich in grace. She writes about a mother who grieves her child's overdose, but then she starts a support group. She is one who mourns, but then she becomes a comfort for others. She writes about a young activist who keeps showing up for peace even when they are mocked. Repeatedly persecuted for righteousness sake. She writes about a grandmother praying for her estranged son.

She embodied a spirit of mercy, being pure in heart. Even where there had been hurt and devastation in the relationship, she never stopped loving or caring. These are not hypothetical saints. They're ones right here with us. They are us.

If we look at the Beatitudes, they really do sound like bad advice for surviving in the modern world. Like, be meek in a market economy and be merciful on social media, hungry for justice in a news cycle that rewards outrage. These are all totally contradictory to how we seem to function in the world. But that is the point of the Beatitudes. The kingdom that Jesus describes is not some improved version of this world. It's a complete reorientation of the world and our complete reorientation of our understanding of the world. In the Beatitudes, God says yes to everything that the world calls foolish.

It's a table that's big enough for an addict to sit down at and for a bishop to sit down at. It's a table that's big enough for the protester to sit down at it's and the police officer to sit down at. It's big enough for the one who doubts to sit down at and for the one who also dares to believe to sit down at. The church is just a bunch of people stumbling towards grace. And the stumbling itself is something that's holy. The saints have not mastered the Beatitudes. We have not mastered the Beatitudes. But we bump up against them again and again and again, and we find God waiting there for us.

Today, in a little bit, we will light the candles for those who have gone before us and also some of those whom we still honor and in our midst. For saints we've chosen and saints that have chosen us. For ones who have taught us mercy, goodness. For saints who have modeled courage, creativity. For saints who have fed us in more ways than one. When we see these lights and when we look around at the banners, we remember something really important. Sainthood is communal. None of us get there alone in God's kingdom. Holiness, mercy, goodness, hungering for righteousness, all of those things, they are, in fact, contagious. We pass them around, we share them with each other. Maybe it might be better to say we pass it around like bread at a table. That would be better with a communion analogy. But we don't go it alone. It is something that we share with one another. It's catching.

Nadia Bolz Weber says that grace isn't about making us less human. It's about making us more human. And that's what the saints show us: that the kingdom is not something that is just a realm beyond this world, pie in the sky, but it's actually God's divine heartbeat living in us and among us here and now, but also into eternity.

In the United Methodist tradition, we don't canonize saints like the Catholic Church might. And so we may never be canonized, but we can still become Beatitude-shaped people, people who choose mercy in a culture of blame. We can be a people who practice peace in a climate of fear and hostility. We can be a people who stand with those who are poor and those who are grieving. And we can be a people who hunger for justice even when it costs us each act of love, each moment when we choose. The way of the Beatitudes is the kingdom of God breaking through. It's heaven meeting with earth.

And yeah, we are going to mess it up. We're going to screw up, we are going to fall short. We are flawed people, but that's what God has to work with. And so that's what God does. The saints we honor today, and all of us accidental saints sitting here, remind us that God's blessing is not about being flawless. It's about being found by God. It's about being found in our grief and our hunger and our gentleness, in our messy but ordinary love. And so when we all leave this place together, let us remember that we carry the Beatitudes with us.

We are the poor in spirit, we are the merciful, we are the peacemakers. We are beautifully imperfect, just as all of the saints who have gone before us are beautifully imperfect. And yet they, and we, are the ones through whom the kingdom of God continues to break into a broken world. On this All Saints day, may we remember who we are and whose we are. Amen.