

Sermon All Saints Day 2020

November 1, 2020

Matthew 5:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read, especially these words: **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”**

Today is the feast of All Saints. In this feast we look to the saints. I think you all know, but as much as we might associate the word “saint” with the exemplary people throughout the history of the Church—for example, Saint Paul the apostle, Saint Peter, the disciple, St. John the evangelist—the word saint itself doesn’t have to mean those people in particular. It doesn’t mean just the holiest of the holy ones. No, look at Paul’s letters. He writes to the saints in a particular place. **“To the saints who are in Ephesus.”** Or he writes to the church. **“To the church of God that is in Corinth.”** This is because saints are just God’s people. They are God’s people who have been made holy. They have been washed from their sin, and they have been sanctified—or as I tell my confirmation students, they have been “holified”—by the blood of Jesus given to them and received by faith. As Paul goes on to say in that introduction to the Corinthians, **“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”** So, the saints are those who are holy in Christ. This means that as we celebrate this day, we celebrate those who are saints, those who are holy in Christ. Today we remember, in particular, those who have gone before us in that faith, where they enjoy the fullness of holiness in the presence of Jesus.

Now, having said that, as I often do on this occasion, rather than focusing on the dead, I’m actually going to look at the Church altogether. Today, I want to look at something that especially marks the Church: mercy. To be clear, as I say that mercy marks the Church we have to understand something. As Lutherans we use this term Mark of the Church with a specific understanding. We use it to say, if you want to know where the Church can be found look for its marks. I’ll be deviating from that just a bit. How so? Well ordinarily, what do we as Lutherans say marks the Church? Do you know? If you were to look for the Church, properly, if you were to look for where you could find God’s people, what would you look for? Or let’s say you moved and were looking for a new church home, what would you look for? Most of you, I’m assuming, would start by looking on your phones for the nearest Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation. And that’s a good place to start, but not just because we’re Lutherans and we always want to be Lutherans

and those other people are just bad because they're not Lutherans, right? Why is that a good place to start? Well, on the one hand because the expectation should be that if you go there you will hear the Bible taught properly, right? But there is some really good Bible teaching in some other churches, no? And on top of that, you get some guys who are really good public speakers there too. You get preachers who can grasp your attention and not let it go for a sermon that's a half an hour long. But is engaging preaching a mark of the church? It's actually not. The reason you go to a Missouri Synod Church is because of the Marks of the Church, properly: The Gospel purely preached, and the sacraments rightly administered according to Christ's institution. That's what we say as Lutherans.

You want to KNOW with certainty, without a doubt where God is gathering His Church, where He is making people holy? Find where the Gospel is purely preached. Find where the pastor is telling you that you get to go to heaven, not because you're good enough, because you deserve it, because of any merit or worthiness in you, but because of what Jesus has done for you, and because of that alone. In other words, that you are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the work of Christ alone. Likewise, find where they tell you that your baptism actually buried you into Jesus' death and raised you in His resurrection, not because of the certainty of your confession, but the promise of God's Word. And finally, where they tell you that Jesus' body and blood come to you in with in and under the bread and wine and deliver to you what He says: the forgiveness of sins. This is where you find the Church. This marks the Church. Why? Because the church is made holy by these things, by the faith that the Holy Spirit promises to give in this Gospel, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper and promises nowhere else.

Now having said all of that, I'm not going to focus on those marks today—and you might be thinking, “Pastor you just did.” Well, I did because it's going to tie back to the mark I am talking about: mercy. Those words: **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”** tell us that mercy marks us. Now, to be fair, all of these beatitudes, as we call them, all of these “blessings” that Jesus speaks describe the Church. But I'm going to focus on this one for two reasons. First, we need mercy in our day. We need mercy always for ourselves, but in our society we need to show mercy more than ever. We're increasingly lacking in that mercy, but we need it. The second is because it ties really well to the Gospel Lesson for next Sunday, and we'll be doing the Narrative Service so I won't get to preach on it then. What's that lesson? That's the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. That's the story of the man who has the great debt before his master, a debt that's around two hundred thousand years' worth of wages according to the note in the ESV Bible. The parable starts with the master collecting debts. And he gets to this servant, and he demands that the debt be repaid. The servant falls down and pleads for

mercy. He says, **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”** And what does the master do? Does he arrange a repayment plan? No! He forgives the servant of the debt. He doesn’t say, “OK, now if you work this much overtime, and you do this many hours of good work for me, then this debt will be paid up.” No. The debt is forgiven. It’s gone without anything done by the man. This is an abundance of mercy on the part of the master. This man doesn’t deserve it, this man hasn’t earned it, but out of the compassionate heart of the master comes the willingness not to patiently receive repayment, but to forgive the debt altogether.

Of course, I’m sure at this point most of you remember what happens next. The man leaves the presence of the master, goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a much smaller debt, something akin to one hundred days’ labor, and he demands it from this fellow. Not only he does he demand it, but he demands it harshly. The fellow pleads in the same way the man had pleaded with their master, but the man won’t relent. The master, then finds out and casts the first man in prison. To this Jesus says, **“So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”** In other words, those who do not show mercy, will not be shown mercy. In the positive, **“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”**

So, we see it then, mercy is a mark of the Christian. Are you then merciful? Be merciful. Be gracious to those around you. Be gracious to those who sin against you. It’s hard. It’s hard because hurt taints us, pain taints us. It taints our conscience. It affects even our standing before God in a sense. I was reading a book this week that was really interesting in what it said about this. It said that when we are wounded that affects us. It made the point that in our society, we treat this wounding an opportunity to love ourselves and build ourselves up. We say, “I was hurt and now that justifies me to act in that same way to others.” We use it as a justification for the self-centeredness that we all are born with as sinners. But this doesn’t do any good. It envelops us in this self-centeredness. It turns us back to ourselves to that “navel gazing” that I periodically talk about. No, our default should be mercy.

In fact, this book that I mentioned is actually about marriage, but its application goes well beyond marriage. Listen to how the author makes that point as he speaks about love and ultimately mercy in general. Now to give context he’s talking about how within marriage you have to have love and truth, not just this love that doesn’t address challenges, especially this idea of love that we have in our day that it is just this mushy feeling. Listen to what he says: *“Love without truth is sentimentality; it supports and affirms us but keeps us in denial about our flaws. [But] Truth without love is harshness; it*

*gives us information but in such a way that we cannot really hear it. God's saving love in Christ, however, is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical, unconditional commitment to us. The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourself and repent. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace."*

Hopefully in that quote, then, you hear the shift. Seamlessly, this went from the mercy we should show to the mercy we receive. Tim Keller, the author of that quote, makes the great point about truth and love. He makes that point that love and truth go hand in hand. But in a different way of saying it, he says, but what mercy is, what God's mercy to us is, is that He knows the truth about us and still loves us. That's why we are marked by mercy as Christians, because we have received that love. God has known just how sinful you are. He has known that debt of 200,000 years' worth of labor you have to do to repay the debt. And yet it has been forgiven. Yet that debt has been nailed to the cross in Jerusalem in 30 A.D. and buried in the tomb of Jesus. The burning of the note of your debt was made public on the day of His resurrection.

And to tie back to the Marks of the Church, that's what those mean. Those marks, the preaching of that pure Gospel, the baptizing, the giving of the Holy Supper, in those God has without equivocation given that mercy to you, promised you that this is the case for you. How can you not be merciful in view of that? How can you not forgive whatever has happened to you, no matter the hurt. And don't get me wrong, there is real hurt.

My wife and I were talking to our kids about that. We were saying that if someone did something to them, then it would be extremely hard for us to forgive that person. But even still there is that call to mercy. How? Because as hurtful as that is to me, God has forgiven me far beyond that. It might not seem like it to my puny, self-absorbed understanding; my sinful self that wants to wallow in all the bad that has happened to me. But it's true. My debt to God far, far surpasses even the worst sin against me. And yet God has shown me mercy. **Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.**

As I say all of this, though, to conclude with one final thought to tie all of this together, this must be understood properly. The merciful don't earn the blessing of being shown mercy by their own mercy. No, this blessing of receiving mercy comes from God first. It originates from Him to us in Christ. It is the only way we can show this mercy. Our lack of mercy rejects it and denies it. But it always comes from Him first. This how we are holy. This is how we are saints: always by the holiness He gives to us in His grace. But in that, we are holy. In that we are saints with all of those who have gone before us. Thanks be to God. Amen.