

“Blessed Are... You” / Matthew 5:1-12 / 11 November 2012

Have you ever asked yourself, “What does she see in that guy?” Or the perennial question, “What’s a nice guy like him doing with...her?” There are times when you just want to look someone square in the eye and say, “I think you could do better. Why do you insist on staying with a person who doesn’t treat you right?” Or a person who can’t appreciate your values, or get your jokes, a person who doesn’t understand you... “How can you be friends with a rightwing fascist like that guy? Or a pinko commie?” When I look at that guy, all I see is a woman-hater, a racist, a bore. What do you see in him, or her, that could possibly outweigh all of that? Our friends and family members develop these attachments to people we don’t care for at all, and it’s not just their attachments to people that trouble us. Why do you stay in that big, empty house now that the family has all moved away? What do you see in that place? Why do you keep that angry little dog that snaps at visitors and tears up your furniture? What do you see in that dog? Why do you stay in the old neighborhood with its tiny lawns and boxy houses; why don’t you sell and move to Upper Saint Clair? These are all questions we’ve wanted to ask people from time to time. Explain your commitments to me, because they don’t make sense from where I stand. What do you see in that guy?

We’ve all stood on the outside of an unlikely relationship and puzzled over it. In the old movie *Harold and Maude*, a morbid 20-year old named Harold is obsessed with death. In the opening scene, Harold is hanging by his neck from a chandelier in the dining room; his mother walks by and says, “Oh, Harold, get down.” This guy attends the funerals of complete strangers. He drives around town in a hearse. His mother is a socialite, pretentious and distant. All she wants is for Harold to make her look good in the eyes of her high society friends. And so, very much against Harold’s wishes, she sets him up on blind dates with women from “good families.” The dates go badly. On one date, he appears to set himself on fire in front of the girl. On another date, he commits fake hara-kiri in the restaurant, and the girl runs from the room, screaming.

One day, at a stranger’s funeral, Harold meets a seventy-nine year old woman named Maude. She didn’t know the deceased either, but—like Harold—she enjoys funerals. And so they develop an unlikely relationship that, at least for Harold, turns into a romance. In many ways, they’re opposites. Harold is a morose young man and Maude is a lively, bright, quirky little old lady who loves a good funeral, but who wants nothing more than to live life to the fullest. Maude teaches Harold to enjoy life: music, art, fine food, nature. In time, gloomy Harold even learns to play the banjo. One day, Harold and Maude are sitting on the beach, watching the sunset, when Harold gives her a beautiful engagement ring and announces that he wants to marry her. Maude is touched. “Oh, I love it” she says. “I’ll treasure it for the rest of my life.” She admires the ring, puts it on her ring finger, takes it off, and...throws it into the ocean. Then Maude says, “Now I’ll always know where I put it.”

On Maude’s eightieth birthday, Harold throws a private surprise party. As the couple is slow-dancing together, Maude says, “I couldn’t imagine a lovelier farewell.” She goes on to say that eighty is the perfect age to die, so she’s taken an overdose of sleeping pills, and she’ll be gone by midnight. Harold rushes her to the hospital, but it’s too late. In the closing scene, you see Harold’s car careening over a cliff, and just when you think he’s finally done it for real, Harold emerges from the underbrush with his banjo, playing a Cat Stevens song.

What did he see in her, or she in him? Sometimes it's the most unexpected relationships that bear the sweetest fruit. Sometimes it's the intergenerational friendship, or the inter-religious, or the interracial, or the politically mixed relationship that teaches us the most beautiful lessons about humanity and faith, life and God. When has an unlikely person made a difference in your life? Or more to the point, when has someone stood by you and loved you, even when everyone else pointed out your failings and your faults? There's no explaining whom we love or why. But on this morning when we celebrate "All Saints Sunday" (a week late), stop to think about the many imperfect folks, your life's private saints, who have made you into the person you are. Your mother might not have chosen them for you. You might not have chosen them for yourself. Perhaps, when the world was matching up people, it never should have placed you in the same story as that one. But it did. And that seeming accident has changed everything.

All the living world stood back and marveled at Jesus, in his famous Sermon on the Mount, as he sat down on the hillside and addressed the impoverished rabble of his day. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Okay, Jesus, if you say so. But you know, the poor in spirit are spiritually...poor, right? I just want to get that straight. The spiritually poor aren't the kind of people who graduate seminary and pass the ordination exams. Let's just get that straight. He goes on to say, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.' All right, I can deal with that one. 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.' Okay, now I really must object. If the meek inherit the earth, someone will just come along and take it away from them. Don't say I didn't warn you. 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. A better translation is justice. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.' Okay, I'm on board with that one, so long as their justice doesn't infringe on my comforts. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God.' It seems like Jesus is saying, "Blessed are all those who appear to be on the losing side now, for their time is coming."

Then, the most amazing thing of all, Jesus the Galilean peasant looks out across the crowds of people, ragged and worn, workmen, day laborers, hired hands, fishermen, tenant farmers, and housewives. He looks out at these people who stand beneath the Mediterranean sun in their rags and their turbans, their coarse robes and their Arafat-style headgear, and he says to them, "Blessed are you." Maybe nobody has ever told you this, but blessed are you. Maybe your lofty Roman overlords think that you're barbarian lowlifes; maybe they believe you don't matter. Maybe your religious leaders take you for granted, and steal your land, and make life harder for you than it needs to be. Maybe the world doesn't see much when it looks at you in your poverty and your powerlessness. Maybe you don't see much either, but blessed are you.

A high priest or a Roman citizen standing by might have asked Jesus, "Um, dude, what do you see in these people? I mean, look, you're a healer. You're eloquent and wise beyond your years. You can do way better than this crowd. Come on, let's go to Jerusalem and mingle with the important folks. Let's go to Rome, and you can perform some miracles for the emperor. Jesus, believe me. You've got a bright, bright future ahead of you. Someday your name will be in lights! *JESUS SAVES!* Everyone on the globe is going to know your name. Someday, believe me, the most powerful people in this world will claim you as their ally. You need to lose this bunch of riffraff."

But no, Jesus saw something in the riffraff that they couldn't even see in themselves. Have you ever thought that maybe the powerful people of ancient Palestine executed Jesus because they felt slighted by him? "What, he's not impressed with our titles and our palaces? All he cares about is his fishermen, and his ex-prostitutes, his tax-collectors, and lepers, beggars, and widows. It looks like a cheap zombie movie when Jesus comes to town, all the ragged, the lame, the blind, the helpless and the hopeless ambling toward him, following him like puppy dogs. And us with out power, us with our position, us with our richness of spirit! He walks right past us to sit at table with them. What does he see in *those* people? How can he choose them, saying 'blessed are you'?"

Well, he saw something in them, something no one else saw. And nothing can change your life quite like being seen, noticed, recognized as a person of worth. I was living in Oklahoma City and working across the street from the federal building on the day it was bombed, April 19, 1995. I may tell you the story of that day in some later sermon. It's a little too heavy for most sermons. In any case, a few weeks after the bombing, I made my way back to the little Presbyterian church I attended, close to downtown. I was that congregation's token 20-something, and though I didn't really believe in very much back in those days, I took great comfort in sacred rituals and sacred stories...especially in those strange days after the bomb. Because I was the only person there in his 20s, I was pressured to attend the "young adult" Sunday school class, though all the other "young adults" in the class were in their 30s and 40s. But on one particular day, a few weeks after the bomb, I was the only one who showed up for class. It was awkward. The minister, who taught the class, was a great guy with an Oklahoma twang in his voice. In his mid-50s, he seemed pretty old to me at the time, and he always looked like he was wearing a pair of those Groucho Marx glasses that come equipped with a fake moustache, bushy eyebrows, and a phony nose. After making small talk for several minutes, the minister said, "Well, it doesn't look like anyone else is coming. But you've walked twelve blocks to get here, what do you want to talk about?"

Now, I never would have made an appointment to go talk to my pastor. Never. The black robes were fine from a distance or at the backdoor of the church. This pastor was pretty engaging in a class full of people. But the idea of being alone with him and having to make conversation, it was just too awkward to bear. And yet, much to my own surprise—and probably to his—I talked to the guy. And the longer I talked, the more I began to understand just how deeply the bombing had affected me. By the end of our conversation, he was telling me, "You know, as much as we'd hate to lose you—our only representative of Generation X—I really think you need to get out of town. This has become a depressing place to live, and you're not from here. Inertia is the only thing keeping you here, and you don't have a strong support network. Besides, I think you're the kind of person who will only be happy when you're investing yourself into some kind of work that you find meaningful. You've got this English degree that you're not using. You speak French. Why don't you volunteer for a year or two in a mission school somewhere overseas?" He gave me a phone number.

Sometimes I look back on that day as the real turning point of my life. It was a day when someone saw something in me that I couldn't possibly see in myself. I was too busy fretting over all the finer details to see the bigger picture. As you know, if I hadn't followed his advice and gone off to work for the Presbyterian Church in Africa, I never would have gone to Pittsburgh Seminary, and if I hadn't gone to seminary, I never would

have met my wife, and we never would have had our children. I would never have found my way to this place with you. I might still be working at the library in Oklahoma City.

I tell you that story only because I'm convinced that it's similar to your story. Your saints and heroes are not the Abraham Lincolns of this world. They're the lesser-known folks who reached into your life at a crucial juncture. They saw the things that you could not see; they spoke the words that needed to be spoken. And in time, they exited—stage left—never to be heard from again. They did not make the annals of history. At best, they might get a passing mention in the unread records of some church, or club, or school. But they saw something in you, and what they saw has made all the difference. And now, when some other clergy person feels the need to drop impressive names into a conversation, and he or she asks me who my greatest influence was as a pastor, I name the fellow who pastored a medium sized church in Oklahoma City, a guy who went on to finish out his career in Amarillo. And all these years later, I catch myself speaking like him, minus the drawl. I catch myself structuring sermons like his. I catch myself caring about the issues of social justice that were his life's passion. Aren't most of our saints the little guys, forgotten by history? Blessed are you...Pat Kennedy. You never wrote books, and you never officiated at the funeral of a president. You never landed a steeple as tall as the one we've got here. But you served faithfully and well.

And who are your obscure and unlikely saints, the ones who reached into your life at a crucial juncture, spoke the words that needed to be spoken, did the work that needed to be done, then went on their way unrecognized by Nobel Prize committees? Who saw something in you—some talent, some calling, some need, some heartache—and their seeing made all the difference? Oh, the single parents, the underpaid teachers, the Scout leaders, and the faithful friends. Your life is peopled with improbable saints, some of them not even religious. Blessed are the unlikely ones, the unlovely ones, the unhandsome, the unintelligent, the most beloved and chosen. Here's to the ones who were mediocre in the eyes of this world, but they did what they could, and it was enough. Here's to the ones whose names don't ring a bell, the ones who thought they could, but couldn't. Here's to the ones who knew they couldn't, but gave it their best. The seers, the dreamers, and the no-nonsense folks who just cared. Here's to the ones who threw in the towel, but they touched our spirits first. The famous and powerful may change the course of history, but they have little power to affect change in the human heart. That's your job. Blessed are you!

Sometimes you just want to ask, "What does she see in that guy?" And yet, God sees something in each one of us. And thank God for the others who see it, too. In turn, we see their saintliness, which is invisible to most of the living world. Be grateful for the saints who have lighted your way. Maybe their radiance wasn't enough to illuminate the night skies, but it was enough to show you the way. Celebrate them. And carry on their faithful and unglamorous work. And whose unlikely saint are you? You with your spiritual poverty, your unspoken sadness, your big doubts, your tiny faith, you with your secrets, your old regrets, you with your tangled relationships, and your worries for tomorrow! You peacemakers, and mercy-showers, and justice-seekers! You with your daily joys, some too subtle to notice! You make all the difference in this world, and you do it every single day. Blessed are you. Amen.