

“Blessed Are You” / Luke 6:20-31 / All Saints 2013

“Blessed are you,” Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, “Blessed are you who are poor now. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you who are despised and looked down upon for now. You, the inconspicuous ones, the unassuming ones, you who do not make the history books, who do your small part in the life of the world then exit, stage left, never to be heard from again: yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you.

If you could have dinner with one person from the past, just one person, who would it be? It can be any person at all from any period in history, and the language barrier will not be an issue. Bringing a person magically back from the Great Beyond is the hard part; after that, getting that person to speak modern English is actually pretty easy. You get dinner with just one person from history. Who's it going to be? Now, let me warn you; this is not going to be a fancy affair. No fanfare and no pomp, no angels standing by to wait on you. We're bringing back someone from the dead for you, so please don't expect dinner at the Waldorf on top of that. You get a quiet corner booth at Tambellini's Restaurant in Bridgeville. After an hour and a half, well, your time is up. Sorry but there are other people waiting for your booth. Also, you'll be provided with a nice coupon: buy one dinner entree, get one free, but otherwise you're paying for dinner. But the hardest choice for you will not be deciding between the clam linguini and the chicken Alfredo. The hardest decision will be whom to select as a dinner guest. Any person at all in the history of the world. Anyone! Who's it going to be?

The person you choose will tell us a lot about who you are and what you value. If you're having trouble deciding, then let me suggest a few possibilities. If you majored in English—like the majority of Presbyterian clergy I know—then you might want to dine with William Shakespeare. You'll probably have to teach him how to twirl his spaghetti with fork and spoon, but otherwise, it should be a pretty engaging conversation. The guy surely has no idea just how much he's shaped the English language. Whenever someone says “dead as a door nail,” or “come what may,” or “a sorry sight,” that person is quoting Shakespeare. You might want to ask him how he came to be such an insightful student of human psychology in a day long before the study of the mind. How did he produce so many masterpieces, like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*? Now, even the best authors get an occasional touch of writer's block, but you might want to ask him what he was thinking when he wrote *Titus Andronicus*. (Ah, truant Muse!)

As long as we're talking about psychology, you might want to have dinner with Sigmund Freud. Just be careful what you order on the menu and what say; he'll find great meaning in the shape of your meal and in any slip of your tongue. Ah, better leave that alone. What about a historic villain, like Adolph Hitler? You could ask him what he was thinking. You could ask him if he's had enough time to think about what he's done, if he's finally sorry. No, probably not a great idea. What about that genius, Leonardo da Vinci? Painter, sculptor, mapmaker, geologist, architect, mathematician, botanist, and inventor all rolled into one very enlightened individual! You wouldn't have to explain pasta to him, either. You could have dinner with a President; you could summon George Washington in his powdered wig and coattails—ask him about the cherry tree. You could dine with Abraham Lincoln, or Richard Nixon, or—wait, no, that one's still alive. How about a religious leader like Calvin or Knox—see if they're really as dour as history

makes them out to be. You could have dinner with Saint Anthony and ask him how he got stuck with the job of helping people find their lost car keys.

I might actually want to talk with that long-ago patriarch of the Hickman clan who built our house. I'd like to know who he was, when he got here, what he saw in the Civil War. I've got questions about when the farmhouse was built, what the strange machinery is in the summer kitchen, with its big wheels and its leather belts. I've got questions about certain rooms and what their functions used to be. I especially want to know if the room above the back porch is meant to have a steeply sloping floor. The guy who sold us the house called it a "drying room" and said that the sloping floor was built that way on purpose, so that you could lay wet clothes out on the floor in the winter, and the water would drip downhill. But I'm beginning to believe that it was not built that way, that perhaps we've got old mineshafts running beneath the house like those dark tunnels in *The Lord of the Rings*, a wet, gloomy netherworld waiting to swallow us up.

You get an hour and a half in a corner booth with anyone—anyone!—of your choice. The possibilities are endless. But let me venture a guess: You would not choose any of these people I've named. You would not have dinner with Genghis Khan, or Amelia Earhart, or Mother Theresa. You would brush past Andrew Carnegie, and George Patton, and Mozart, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If you could have just an hour and a half with anyone from the past, you would pick someone whose name I do not know. You would pick someone who has left very little mark on history. There is no Wikipedia article about the person you would choose. No, you would choose to be reunited once again with a personal hero, a private saint, who touched your life and made it good. You would want to pick up again where you left off with one whose name is not known to history, but whose fingerprints linger on your heart and in your life. A parent, a spouse, a child. A mentor, a friend, a neighbor. "Blessed are you," Jesus says to the tattered and the weary, the sunburnt and the long-forgotten peasants of ages past, the fishers, and the farmers, and the day laborers. "Blessed are you the imperfect ones, and the unaccomplished ones, the all-but-forgotten ones whose names didn't make the book. Blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom of God."

We've just read the gospel writer Luke's lesser known version of Matthew's famed Beatitudes. These are not exactly the Beatitudes that you learned in Sunday school long ago. Did you notice the very clear differences in Luke. Matthew—for once—is more poetic than Luke, but Luke's version is more urgent. Listen to what Luke does. He says, "Blessed are you who are poor *now*, for someday you'll be rich. Blessed are you who are hungry *now*, for someday you'll be filled. Blessed are you who weep *now*, for someday you will laugh." Luke's Jesus seems to be saying, essentially, that every dog has its day, and that if your day is not today, then give it time. And if your day is today, well, then give it time. But there's a whole lot more to what Jesus is saying in the Gospel of Luke. He's lifting up the broken people, the tired people, the dejected and the worn-down. He's exalting the lowly, the less-holy, the helpless and the hopeless. He's calling them the blessed ones who will come at last into possession of the kingdom of God.

Sven and Lena were sitting side by side in their pew, listening to the pastor go on and on with his sermon. Lena looked over and noticed that Sven's eyes were closed. She elbowed him in the ribs. "Wake up, Sven! You can't sleep during the sermon. The pastor will see you and be offended." Sven whispered to his wife, "I wasn't asleep; I was reflecting on the great hereafter." Lena said, "Oh, now I know you're lying. He's not

even talking about heaven.” “I know that,” said Sven. “I was thinking about the coffee and cake we’ll have here...after.”

It might be fair to say that, for a lot of people, religion is preoccupied with the hereafter. A newfangled adage says, “Religion is for those who want to stay out of hell, and spirituality is for those who've been there.” Whoever came up with that little slogan has some wildly misinformed ideas about religion. But it remains true that very often, when we observe All Saints Day, we dwell on the afterlife. We think about the dear departed and their ongoing presence in our day-to-day living. In some churches, the first Sunday in November feels like an annual memorial service for all the recently deceased. But, truly, too much of my life is spent at funerals, and my guess is that you might say the same thing. The point of All Saints is that the people who make a real difference in this world are not necessarily the prime ministers, and presidents, and celebrities, but the people Jesus loved most dearly: the obscure, the unlikely saints who did what needed to be done, then stepped beyond view, exiting to no applause, the ones who taught us how to do what was right, and love what was good, the Sunday school teachers, and the coaches, the accountants, and the homemakers, the imperfect but good people—living and dead—who showed us whom to be, how to be, and what to do and say. In the greater scheme of things, in somebody's life somewhere, my guess is that you are one of them.

Blessed are you who run yourselves ragged, who organize the church dinners, and teach the kids, and serve on the committees. Blessed are you who show up when the boiler goes out, and make sure the building is locked, who sing, and play, and pray, and give. You are the very saints of God, and I for one am grateful for you. Blessed are you who stand up and speak out against injustice, even though it makes your voice tremble. Blessed are you who find something to love in a person all others curse. Blessed are you who look around and realize that the cavalry isn't coming, then you set about the task of saving the day yourself. Blessed are you who occasionally blink back a tear, but then you swallow hard and you keep on going. Blessed are you who think you can, and blessed most of all are you who know right well that you cannot, so you whisper a prayer and try anyway. Yours is the kingdom of God. Perhaps no books will be written about your life and work, but were books ever written about your private saints and heroes? Today is your day to give thanks for them, those awkward, unlikely saints who have peopled your life and, despite their failings, they have placed in you whatever is meaningful and good. Blessed are they. And blessed are you for doing the same. Yours is the kingdom of God. Jesus' promise is that Someone, somewhere, sees and knows. You make all the difference in this big world, and blessed are you. Amen.