

“The Company of the Blessed” / Matthew 5:1-12 / 2 November 2014

“Blessed the poor, blessed the hungry, blessed the peacemakers, the merciful, the powerless, the mourners, the meek—whoever they are—blessed the persecuted. Jesus' list of the blessed becomes almost ridiculous after a while. Blessed the master, blessed the dame, blessed the little boy who lives down the lane. And blessed are you. On “All Saints Sunday,” we pause at the crest of a high hill to look back upon our own journey through life, all the ground we've covered, all that we've learned and unlearned, the sorrows and joys that years have brought. Who are the people who've sped you on your way? Who makes up your private pantheon of saints? Or, to make the question a little easier: Aside from your parents, what three imperfect people did the most to add beauty, and goodness, and truth to your life? Who are your saints?

Do you know who I think of every time I read these words of blessing, these Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew? I think of Jack Brannan, who used to sit right about there. He had these words underlined in his Bible, and this passage was read at his funeral. I've only journeyed with you folks at Bower Hill Church for a little over four years, so far, and that's not a very long time. But sometimes, standing in this pulpit of a Sunday morning, gazing out across your faces, I'm reminded of other faces still familiar to my memory, people who used to sit out there where you sit. Some of their old customary spots still stand empty, like Tiny Tim's vacant seat in the chimney corner. And some of their empty seats have long since been claimed by others, just as familiar and always just as welcome. Jack would sit back there and take in every word, but he didn't sit stiff and unresponsive. No, Jack to this day is the only parishioner I have ever had who actually leaned in to listen to a sermon. He responded physically to sermons, the way you and I might respond to a scary movie, flinching, leaning forward, rolling his eyes. He would shift forward to listen more attentively. He would make gestures in response to my rhetorical questions. He would nod, and smile, shaking his head sadly when I spoke about the brokenness of the world, throwing his hands in the air when I spoke of our complicity in that brokenness. I'm told that Jack used to point to his wrist when he thought the service should be over, though he never did it to me. Jack spent his Mondays on the telephone to the church secretary, to the chair of the worship committee, to me. He even called the director of the public television station, WQED, to give his opinion on the weekend's programming, and she showed up at his funeral. “For all the saints who from their labors rest!” The opinionated saints, the abrupt. Blessed are they!

Not far from Jack sat Chuck Prine. I think he migrated in from somewhere close to the back so that he could hear better. He would look up with a skeptical grin at every lofty-sounding word of each hymn. He would make his incredulous smirk each time I made reference to anything that cannot be proven by scientific fact. He would invite me out to lunch at Houlihan's and ask, “You don't really believe all that stuff, do you?” His passion was for the poor and downtrodden, and he wasn't always sure the church was the answer to their problems. He was the only agnostic I've ever known who believed the pastor ought to spend his Saturdays going door-to-door. And yet, there he was, week after week, faithfully taking his rightful place among the people of God. Here he was, casting his lot with us, who were his community. “For all the saints, who from their labors rest!” The doubting saints, the uncertain. Blessed are they!

And over by the second pillar sat Peggy Craig in her wheelchair, smiling her gentle smile. Without the full use of her legs, it must have taken a long time in the early

mornings to get herself ready for a 9:30 service, and then getting the wheelchair into the car and into the church. It must have been hard. But she never missed a Sunday unless she was terribly sick. And her kindly smile radiated a sort of benediction out over all the room. Any public speaker has a few faces that he or she looks to when the speech or sermon isn't going well. Whenever I realized that the sermon wasn't exactly a hit, that I wasn't being clear, or folks were staring at the ceiling, I could always look over at Peggy, and there she would be smiling encouragement to me from her wheelchair. She never had a lot to say, but she didn't need words. She had her smile. "For all the saints," the aged, the lame, the sweetly smiling. Blessed are they, who've made us who we are, who stepped up and did their part, however small. They were who we needed them to be at the time. Our small part is all we're ever expected to do. Blessed are they. Blessed are you.

Just a few rows further up sat Kurt Kerner, truly the humblest, most gentle person I've ever known to date! And Susan Nilsen, who sojourned with us a while, whose weekly appraisal of my sermons I always called "The Nilsen Ratings." And Margie Sewall, and Len Heisey, and Al Eisenbeis, and the Steinmarks, along with countless others whom I knew but never saw in the pews, Holly Child, Tooie Sharkey, and on and on! I ask you, do they not surround us still, this company of the blessed? Have they not made this church what it is? And so, I ask again, who are the saints of your life, living or dead, who surround you forever, the simple and the strange, the grumpy and the graying, the awkward and unlikely saints who have contributed more to your life than you can ever say? Today is your day to own them and to name them. Today is your day to thank God for coming to you in the faces of all those imperfect people, who showed you what you needed to see, taught you what you needed to know, made you whom you needed to be. Blessed are they! No, this world will not be saved by men in tight emerging from phone booths. Besides, phone booths are as rare today as capes and white horses. This world will be rescued by ordinary women and men who sleep with their teeth in a glass beside their bed, unglamorous people clad in corduroy and denim, regular folk who open their faulty hearts to all that is right, and who participate with God in some small way to bring about all things that tend toward goodness, truth, and beauty. These are the company of the blessed. Blessed are they! And insofar as you are one of them, blessed are you!

When Jesus spoke these long-remembered words, "The Beatitudes," from a sun-baked hillside far away, he was not making his address to the powerful of his day. Although John the Baptist had drawn mighty crowds out into the wilderness, though kings and priests came to the banks of the Jordan to listen to John speak, it was not so for Jesus. At least not in those early days in Galilee. No, sitting on the flanks of the barren hill that day were only nameless folks, forgotten to history, those whose lives of endless labor could not afford them daily bread, the landless, the homeless, the blind and the lame. Jesus drew the forgotten folk of the countryside, poor fishers, sharecroppers, shepherds. And to them he declared, "Blessed are you who suffer. Salt of the earth, blessed are you."

This word "saint" was first used by Paul to describe the ordinary church members whom he would go on, in his letters, to lambast as especially blemished people, pointing out all their faults. Then, the word "saint" came to be applied only to those special people who make the rest of us look like selfish louts, those holy ones who are enthroned

forever in the stained glass of cathedrals, whose pure lives breathed an air of sanctity over all the living world, making everything they touched holy. St. Francis, preaching to the birds. St. Theresa, falling into hallowed trances. St. Sebastian, pierced with arrows, a martyr for the faith, gazing calmly heavenward. The trouble with that kind of saint is that you and I can't easily relate to them...because they're not real. They're the product of "hagiography," historical editing. No, when the Apostle Paul gave us the word "saint," he applied it to ordinary people who did their best and failed as often as not. And so, I ask again, who are the saints that have peopled your life and journey? Who looked into your life and saw you when others looked past you? Who noticed the hurt that others did not and did his or her part in helping to heal it? Who saw the potential, heard what you really meant beneath all that you were saying? Who loved you, forgave you, understood you, welcomed you? What coach, what teacher, what neighbor, what friend gave you that rarest gift of real attention? In whose voice did God speak truth to you?

We all like to think that though we are imperfect ourselves, someone out there really is above all reproach. And yet, none of my heroes have had superpowers. I'm aware of a certain "Anxiety Girl," able to jump to the worst conclusions in a single bound, but she too is one of my life's saints. One Sunday morning, back in the 1995, I was the only person who showed up for the young adults Sunday school class, taught by the pastor. We ended up talking, and he admitted to me that he could see I was not very happy. I was far from home, my college friends had mostly moved away. Oklahoma City had just been bombed, and I was a witness to the whole event. It was a difficult time to be without family or friends. Then this pastor did something that I wonder if I would have the courage to do today. He told the one-and-only 20-something in his church (me) to go away, to go overseas for a while, to get out of town. I had no support system in that town, and it wasn't my place. He recognized that and advised me to leave. And I did. It led me to Africa, then to seminary, and then here to this place to be with you. I look back on that moment as a turning point in my life. That little church has long since closed its doors, and the pastor moved away. I've looked for him, but he's become elusive. He's never responded to my attempts to reach out to him. I learned later from a mutual friend that he is perhaps struggling with some serious personal problems. Does that diminish his sainthood in my life? No, not in the slightest, for he saw me and heard me when no one else did.

The movie "Places in the Heart" is set in rural Texas in the Depression. It's a story of tragedy and injustice, and a band of misfits who stick together to help each other out: a white widow, played by Sally Field, a blind man, played by John Malkovich, and a black farmhand wanted for theft, played by Danny Glover. There's treachery and racial hatred. It's an earthy movie with no fantasy at all, until the very end. The closing scene takes place in a church. As the camera slowly pans the congregation receiving communion, we recognize all the characters — those living and dead and departed for other places, black and white, side by side in a way that never could have happened in the 1930s in Texas. The lambs and the wolves, the wronged and the wrongdoers, the betrayers and the betrayed, are all free of their earthly passions and prejudices, as they serve each other the bread and the wine.

Yes, these are the only saints this world will ever get—the guilty, the unlikely, the ones sitting beside you in the pew today, the ones whose hands will pass you the wine and the bread. Blessed are they! And so, I leave you with two questions: First, who are

your life's saints? Find those three saints, whether living or dead; find those three souls who made all the difference in your life, and tell them what they've done for you. A paper letter, written by hand, a phone call, a whispered prayer, an email only if you must. And the second question: Whose saint are you? Who looks to you for guidance, for hope, for courage, companionship, joy? Whose saint are you? These are the company of the blessed; they're the only answers we will ever get to this world's problems. Insofar as you are one of them, blessed are you. Amen.