

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

On Sunday mornings this year, we have heard a lot from the Gospel of Matthew. More often than not, when I have raised this gospel book and read to you from its pages this year, I have begun by saying "The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew", as I did just now. Matthew's narrative of Jesus' life and times begins with some stories about his birth, his baptism, his gathering of some disciples, and the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. Apparently, Jesus becomes quite popular and well-known across the countryside, and Matthew tells how crowds begin to follow him from village to village to see his healings and hear his teachings. And he begins to use this phrase when he speaks to them: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near". Then one day, when the crowds are large and the time seems right, he goes up a hillside and begins to preach about just what that means. What does it mean that the kingdom of heaven has come near, that it is just over the horizon, that it is just waiting over that hill? Now early in his ministry, attended by his new disciples, Jesus begins to preach what has become known as the 'Sermon on the Mount'. And he begins with these beatitudes, these proclamations of blessings that are found in that kingdom which is so near. He introduces his sermon with these words which have become famous. The sermon will go on throughout chapters five, six, and seven, and will include many famous teachings and even the Lord's Prayer, but he begins with these beatitudes. He begins with a premise, and a promise.

The premise is that on the premises of this kingdom of heaven there is salvation and wholeness and the blessings of right relationships, blessings of glory and wisdom, and thanksgiving and honor, and power and might. That's the premise. That there are blessings. And the promise is that the kingdom of heaven is near and is indeed coming, and that we all, from every nation and tribe and people and language, are invited to come to taste and see that the Lord is good. Those who are in need, like the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, and those who are hungry for justice, will be fortunate to find that God is on their side. And those who are merciful, those who are pure in heart, who make peace, and who risk persecution for their efforts, will find that they are fortunate because they are on God's side. All will be blessed, and all should rejoice and be glad, for the universal invitation is in the mail, and the party is about to begin. Everything else that Jesus preaches in this sermon on the mount, everything else that Jesus teaches throughout his ministry, everything else that Jesus does to demonstrate the nature of the kingdom of heaven by his life and travels, begins here at the beatitudes. They are the premise of his message and the assurance of his promise. Read them again and see if you agree.

But a close reading raises some questions. Jesus uses a lot of passive voice here in his grammar, and not just in the English translations, by the way. The Greek text also leans on that passive voice mystery and vagueness. So, the mournful will be comforted? By whom? Those who thirst for righteousness and justice will be filled? By whom, exactly? So, the merciful will receive mercy? From whom? And the peacemakers will be called children of God? Oh, yeah? By whom? Well, by God, of course! Well, if that's the whole point, why doesn't Jesus come right out and say so?! He could have just said, "God the Father will comfort those who mourn" or, "God the Father will reveal himself to the pure in heart", or "God will have mercy on the merciful." After all, all good things come from God, right? But I think here in the beatitudes, here in the premise and promise, Jesus is leaving the door open, and open widely. Here he hopes we will understand that God prefers to work these good

things through us, with our assistance. In the premises of the kingdom, those who mourn will be comforted, at least in part, by us! We will help give the meek their inheritance of the earth. The pure in heart will be able to see God through us. We will help feed justice to those who hunger for it. By being in right relationship with others, we will help them achieve and find their God-given blessings. And in doing so, we ourselves will be blessed. And we will rejoice and be glad. Those who are in need will be fortunate to find that God, and we, are on their side. And those whose efforts assist God's work will be fortunate to find that they, and we, are on God's side. They should all rejoice and be glad.

Which brings us to our special celebration today. All Saints' Day is celebrated each year on November first and focuses our attention on those who profess to call themselves citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The early Christian writers, including those whose work can be found in the New Testament portion of the Bible, considered all those who witnessed to God's abiding love, to be "saints". They included those whose destiny it was to become martyrs, those who were missionaries on Christ's behalf, and even those whose ordinary lives testified to God's goodness. All who accepted the invitation to be members of Christ's Body. They were all citizens of the kingdom which was always coming near. The author of First John, as we heard this morning, called all of those 'children of God'. He writes "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." They are 'all saints'. That is the premise and the promise. Should we accept the invitation ourselves, then we are counted among the saints, too. I may have told you about the time I visited a parish in the State of Maine, in the rural backwoods. That parish had taken the name "All Saints", and when the stained glass windows were designed, the individuals pictured in them, young and old, men and women, different races and different sizes and shapes, were all given blank faces! The intent, I was told, was that when one looked at them, one could imagine anyone to be a saint; that one could imagine that anyone's face could be seen and recognized as a member of Christ's Body, as a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Yes, today we celebrate all those who consider themselves to be citizens of that kingdom which Jesus preached was coming near, whose pledge of allegiance includes those baptismal vows to always repent and return to God's promise and respect the dignity of all persons, their pledge to be in right relationship, and to love God and neighbor. We celebrate those who seek to be their best selves on God's behalf despite criticism, persecution, and alienation. For as the Book of First John says, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know God the Father." But remember, that citizenship in God's kingdom includes not just the rewarding benefits of grace, but also the responsibilities of discipleship. We celebrate today those whose discipleship has been sincere and memorable. We celebrate, among others who yet live in this world, those who have passed on ahead of us, who have relinquished their dual-citizenship to already live exclusively in the kingdom of heaven. Even, frankly, some who had not really expected it! Leslie and I will read a list of those whom we love but see no longer, but it is just a representative list, a partial roll of those whom we all want to remember, and I hope that you will, in your hearts, contribute abundantly to the list we offer. For we celebrate today all those who have accepted the invitation to be members of Christ's Body, those who are finding the truth of Christ's promise and promise, those who are becoming saints in ways they never could have imagined. Amen