

# *Blessed*

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All Saints Sunday, November 5, 2017

Reading: Matthew 5:1-16

*(Worship included the honoring of church members over the age of 90)*

## *Saints?*

One of my favorite church holidays is one that doesn't get on the *American* calendar except by association. All Saints Day in the United States is all but unknown, save for the night that comes before, All Hallow's (All Saint's) Evening, or, for short, Hallowe'en. On the Sunday right *after* Halloween *and* All Saints Day we traditionally remember ALL the Saints, rather than just the designated saint of the day.

Now we *don't have* designated saint's days, you Baptists and UCC folk may exclaim, and that's technically true—but we *do have saints*-- all saints. In the old timey language of even a hundred years ago, the term saint was used for church-folk broadly. You didn't have to be officially registered, so to speak—canonized. All Saints Sunday is as good a time as any to remember that *all* the saints are not officially recognized or even unofficially honored. This goes for Catholics and protestants alike. Some die in obscurity, known only to a few other kindred souls. For a saint, in the deepest Christian understanding, is not someone who gets it all right—but, rather, someone who tries like heck to follow Jesus, makes lots of mistakes, and tries again. A saint, in the words of an old Black gospel tune, is just a “sinner who falls down—and gets up.”

Real saints forget themselves and lose their tempers. Real saints enjoy laughing as much as the next person. Real saints stand up to be counted when it counts—but sometimes it takes a lot of soul searching and wrestling in the soul and overcoming their nervousness when they do.

Real saints need each other, too, because nobody does it all well, and surely not alone. God blesses us—as Jesus reminded his first friends on the side of a mountain one day—God blesses us each in different ways. To one of us, the blessing of peacemaking comes easy, where to another it looks impossible. To one of us, humility is second nature, where to another, it's a lesson that comes hard,

and late in life. To one of us, the hunger and thirst for justice for our neighbors is just what comes natural, a blessing from God our maker. Some of us tend to get hungry for fine food and good drink. But Justice and human liberation? Eh. So, thank God for the friends who hunger for justice and make us do the harder thing.

### *Blessed!*

Many folks these days talk as though to “be blessed” is to receive material wealth, or lots of recognition, to be stars. But the kind of blessing Jesus outlines in what we heard this morning are blessings of a different variety, with different rewards. It’s not the easy blessings that prosperity preachers tell us will get us wealth and happiness and lots of adulation. Nope. These blessings are the kind of blessings that can get us in trouble, not once but over and over. But it is trouble of the very best kind. It is the kind of trouble that the world needs more of.

As we look back on the folks we know, whom we most deeply long to be like, it is the people who embody these more challenging blessings with their lives, not by their success but by their faithfulness, not by their wealth of pocketbook but by their wealth of self-giving, and a deeper joy than the world can give.

The beloved in Christ whom we have honored today at Emmanuel Friedens are the members of this church who are more than ninety years of age. There is a surprising number of them, not all able to be present with us today. But if you consider these individuals whom we have named, they, you, fit the bill. Comfortable or not, we are going to call them our saints.

Now let me hasten to add: These are not saints in the conventional sense, or in some ideal sense. Sorry, friends, but we know each other too well to see you as sainted in the sense of being some kind of holy perfect stereotype. We may have overheard you use that bad word when something awful happened. We have seen you misbehave at a meeting—just as you have seen us! We know you and you know us, and we don’t have perfect prayer lives. Nary a one of us!

I can see you still squirm at the very idea of being called a saint. But before you give up on the whole idea of a sainthood that is available and real and right among us, let me come back round to the beatitudes, the “blessed are” statements of Jesus.

Among the women and men we have honored today, we have the poor in spirit—people who rely utterly on God, when they have no place else to turn.

Among those we named this morning we have peacemakers who have struggled to bring together enemies, or maybe simply found the grace after years to forgive and be forgiven by a loved one.

Among those we named we have those whose humility is real—not self-effacing, self-abnegating or fake humility, but rather total lack of pretense, simplicity and clarity about who we really are with all its limits. These are friends who know how human they are, warts and all, and nonetheless have deep gratitude to God for the gifts of life and love.

Among those we have named today, still living among us, still shining a light, still rubbing a little salt in where it's needed, we have those who have struggled for justice, and others who have paid the price dearly for taking a stand in the workplace, in the street or at home.

If anyone is visiting here today, I want to say simply, don't be fooled by what you see, or fail to see. Our saints don't look like the ones from the books with gilded pages, not around here. We've got some of your more dressed down variety of God's blessed in this church. We have some who confess to being pretty darn imperfect—count the pastor among them—and yet we keep on keeping on. Keep on trying to speak the truth in love, trying to heal where we can, pray where we can, love where we can, raise a little trouble when we need to.

To many, through the centuries, such things have not looked like being blessed or blessing. They look like foolishness.

### ***Holy Foolishness***

Between this foolishness and what's passing for wisdom lately I'll take foolishness. And what's this foolishness to which we are called? Our particular variety is the foolishness of disciples—of those who seek to walk in the path of Jesus of Nazareth. And it is about bucking the kind of wisdom that is self-serving, quite comfortable with power and privilege, and refuses to see and identify with the situation of the poor, the prisoner, the outsider, the ostensibly unclean. Holy foolishness is the adventure that follows Jesus on a path of peace that often irritates the powerful and provokes the professional.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, later executed in a German concentration camp, in his little book on life in intentional community, *Life Together*, has this to say. “Jesus Christ

lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So, the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his commission, his work.”

Following Jesus is another kind of blessing, another kind of treasure. It is engaging the world, in ways that on the face of it are not wise, because they serve an interest deeper and wider and greater than our own well-being alone. And this church is and has long been full of folks, just trying to do that very thing.

What our journey is all about as a congregation, and what the central mission of disciples of Jesus for the last two thousand years remains, is to let all of humanity know that through the love of Christ each person is beloved, and precious and acceptable in the sight of God. Be you gay or straight, rich or poor, black or white, male, female or trans, Asian or European, African or South American by birth, God can set you free of your oppression and self-doubt. You can and will be among the blessed. It doesn't matter if you are able to read or not, able to speak eloquently or only to stumble over your words. God has a purpose for you.

God is choosing you, to be building materials, for a new house, a house still under construction. Nine or ninety-nine years old, God is choosing you for a circle of service in which the greatest blessing is to drink from the cup that Jesus drinks, eat the bread that Jesus breaks, face the cross that Jesus bore, follow the path so well-traveled by such a host of not-so-ordinary witnesses over the centuries. These are the blessings we are invited to receive, these are the blessings we are called to share. *“And the greatest of these is love.”*