

November 6, 2022
Luke 6:20-31

All Saints' Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“It’s Hard to Be a Saint in the City”

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

It’s hard to be a saint in the city.

Over the years, I have been privileged to attend retreats and conferences in many different kinds of retreat centres located far from the busyness of everyday life. Some of these have been rustic location, Lutheran church camps that offer very basic accommodations. Other locations have been retreat centres managed by Roman Catholic and Anglican groups that provide a place of respite and reflection that often includes daily worship and spiritual direction. While none of these retreat locations would be confused with a five-star hotel, some offer very comfortable bedrooms with private baths and meals that would rival any fine restaurant. What all these diverse locations offer is time away from everyday life, from the demands and frustrations that come with living in a populated area, dealing with crowds of people that can sometimes be quite annoying, and the distractions and responsibilities of life. Retreat centres offer a space for quiet reflection and renewal, and during my times at these locations I often find that it becomes easier to be a more faithful Christian in daily life; I am able to focus on prayer, spiritual reading, contemplation, and worshipping God. At a retreat centre, it is easier for me to live a more balanced life, focusing on hearing God’s Word without outside distractions and being more loving to other people in obedience to Christ’s command to *“love one another as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12).

Retreat centres are wonderful places to live a more authentic Christian life; but Christian life is not meant to be lived in a retreat centre or any other place far removed from other people. Christian life is centred on our daily existence in the real world: going to work, paying bills, raising a family, dealing with our neighbours, facing the realities of our troubled world. It is much harder to be a Christian when we are distracted by so much noise and distractions that would draw our attention away from Christ and his Word. It may be preferable to live as a child of God away from the hustle and bustle of daily life, but Christianity is meant to be lived amid the people that God so loved that he gave his only Son. Yes, *“it’s hard to be a saint in the city”* – but that is where God calls us to live and serve as God’s holy people, those who in baptism have been reborn as children of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit and

marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Today's Gospel lesson is a part of a major section in Luke that parallels Jesus' Sermon of the Mount in Matthew; but instead of being located in a place above the cacophony of city life, Luke locates this teaching of Jesus in what he describes as a "level place": "*He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.*" (Luke 6:17). While Jesus often found time for withdrawing from the crowds for prayer (and would at times invite his disciples for these times of retreat), he would always return to be among the crowds who came to hear his teaching and experience his healing and miracles. This first section of the "Sermon on the Plain" is addressed to a large and diverse crowd of both Jews and Gentiles who "*had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.*" (6:18). This crowd had not come to test Jesus or out of idle curiosity; they came to hear Jesus' teaching and to be healed by him: "*And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*" (6:20).

Among this large crowd that gathered in this level place were Jesus' disciples, those who had accepted his invitation to follow him and "*not only wanted to hear what Jesus had to say, they also wanted and needed to learn from him.*" (Debra J. Mumford). Jesus' instructions to his disciples lay out for them the standard for which every disciple should strive so that they might "*take Jesus' teachings and apply them to their own lives.*" (Mumford). The first part of this teaching to the disciples is Luke's version of the Beatitudes, similar to the teaching on blessedness that begins in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. While both versions describe blessedness in a manner very different from the world's understanding, they differ in significant ways. Matthew's beatitudes speak in more general terms ("*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" – Matthew 5:3), while Luke's beatitudes are addressed directly to Jesus' listeners ("*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" – 6:20). Luke's beatitudes speak to real socioeconomic conditions rather than spiritual conditions or attitudes; they are active and performative, declaring God's favour for the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated. They also differ from Matthew's version in that they include corresponding "woes" that declare that those who prosper now will be judged. The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor; this is the second of thirty-two references to "the kingdom of God" in Luke. As Jesus had declared previously in Luke, "*I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose*" (4:43). This proclamation of God's reign is in fulfillment of the

prophecy of Isaiah which Jesus read in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, that *“the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (4:18-19, Isaiah 61:1-2). One of the principal hallmarks of the Kingdom of God will be the redemption of the poor; oppressed now, they will enjoy God’s blessings when God’s reign is accomplished. Hunger and weeping are treated here as aspects of poverty, preventing any romanticized view of the poor. Laughter and joy among the oppressed will characterize the kingdom, fulfilling the promise of Psalm 126 that *“those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves”* (Psalm 126:6). Joy among the people at what God is doing is a common theme in Luke, proclaimed by the angels and included in Jesus’ parables:

- “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” – 1:14-15a
- “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’” – 2:10-11.
- “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” – 15:7.

The fourth beatitude envisions four situations in which the disciples may suffer abuse: *“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.”* (6:22). The condition of being despised is related to the church’s experience of being persecuted, and reward is promised to those who are faithful to the Lord even when cast out and reviled by others:

- “But even if you suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord ... If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.” – 1 Peter 3:14-15, 4:14.

As the beatitudes in Luke announce God’s favour, so also the woes announce God’s judgment which should be a cause for grief and remorse among those for whom all appears to be going well. These woes pick up the thread from the *Magnificat*, the

Song of Mary, in which the mother of Jesus rejoices in what the birth of her son will mean when the Kingdom of God he will proclaim is brought to fruition:

- “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” – 1:51-53.

Repentance for the rich involves more than just giving generous gifts; it means divesting oneself of wealth that encumbers a genuine dependence on God and making restitution for unjust profits (“*There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” – 18:22). Woes are directed to “*you who are laughing now*” (6:25) because such laughter is not a joyful response to God’s work but the laughter of a fool who is both unaware and unconcerned about the promises of the kingdom. Woes are also announced “*to you when all speak well of you*” (6:26); while a good reputation is desirable, when *all* speak well of you it is probably a sign of either the flattery accorded to the rich or the popularity of false prophets (“*If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods, saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,’ such a one would be a preacher for this people!*” – Micah 2:11). These beatitudes and woes “*announce that the end is not yet; when God establishes a just reign there will be a radical reversal in the fortunes of the rich and poor.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Many of the Jews who heard Jesus’ teaching may have been reminded of the blessings and woes set before Israel in the Torah, in which both blessings and curses are related to the people’s obedience in keeping the commandments of the Lord:

- “See, I am setting before you today and blessing a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known.” – Deuteronomy 11:26-28.

Those who would be followers of Jesus must also devote themselves to both hearing the Word of God and walking in obedience to the teachings of Christ. It is a calling that will challenge his disciple to dispense with former ways of thinking and living, including the human instinct to despise one’s enemies and to seek retaliation when one has been wronged. Instead, Jesus instructs his disciples to follow his example as

one who would die on behalf of all people, even those who despised him and were responsible for his death:

- “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” – 6:27-31.

Jesus is teaching his disciples that there is no place in the Christian ethic for vengeance or retaliation. The principle of love for one’s enemies is stated and then repeated in three variations: turning the other cheek, offering your shirt when someone takes your coat, and giving to everyone who begs from you. Jesus’ teaching to his followers sets in place two principles that pose stumbling blocks for modern Christians: the repudiation of privilege based on wealth and the repudiation of retaliation that sparks violence. Jesus’ alternative is not sheer passivity but aggressive action to undermine hostility and violence, rooted in the ethic known as the “Golden Rule” that we should do for others what we would desire others to do for us. *“Jesus’ teachings to his disciples call for imaginative, aggressive, but non-violent responses to the problems that have become such bitter fruit in our own time.”* (Culpepper). Love for one’s enemies and dedication to non-violence were at the foundation of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s preaching and action in his advocacy for civil rights for all people. In a sermon based on Jesus’ teachings, Dr. King identifies the commandment to love one’s enemies as being at the heart of what it means to be a Christian in the face of opposition and violence:

- “Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one’s enemies is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist; he is a practical realist.” – *Strength to Love*.

Jesus’ teachings are addressed to his disciples of every generation, all who would hear his word and devote their lives to being guided by their instructions. They are teachings addressed to all people who through baptism are born anew as saints of our Lord. A “saint” is not merely a person whose life has been remembered throughout the ages, a faithful person for whom churches, schools, and hospitals are named. We are all called to be saints, to be God’s “holy people” who will share the love of Christ

with others and live as examples of what it means to walk as a child of the light so that others may see our good works and give glory to God in heaven.

- “To be a saint is to be human because we were created to be human. To be a saint is to live with courage and self-restraint ... but it is more than that. To be a saint is to live not with the hands clenched to grasp, to strike, to hold tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it; but it is to live with the hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge that there is something greater than the world that mends and renews ... It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full.” – Frederick Buechner.

On All Saints’ Sunday, we remember and give thanks for all the saints we have known, all who have inspired us to walk as children of the light, all who by their faithful witness have been role models on how we can live every day as authentic Christians in a world where being loving and forgiving often puts us at odds with those who seek to spread hatred and violence. We are reminded that Jesus’ call to discipleship does not promise his followers an easy or carefree life; in fact, he warns them that *“you will be hated by all because of my name”* (21:17). But those who are called as saints through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection are also assured that while we will face opposition and even persecution, we have the assurance that *“not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”* (21:18-19).

As we give thanks for all the saints who *“in life and death, with you, dear Lord, in view, learned from your Holy Spirit’s breath to suffer and to do”* (ELW Hymn 427), we are reminded of Luther’s words of encouragement in his treatise written in 1523 entitled *To All Christians in Worms*. Written in response to the persecution of early Lutherans, the letter expresses Luther’s joy that the gospel has taken root among the people of Worms and admonishes them not to grow weary in faith lest they fall back into old errors. Persecution can only give them grounds to rejoice and thank God *“that we are like the prophets and apostles, yes, like Christ himself. For we know very well that we have God’s word on our side ... which overcomes everything.”*

“It’s hard to be a saint in the city” – in cities as diverse as Jerusalem, Worms, and even Stratford. It is much easier to be devoted to Christ’s teachings when we are removed from the challenges and anxieties of daily living, with constant reminders of the hatred and animosity that so infect our world. But the life of a saint, the calling

to be a disciple, is not a call to be removed from the world but to enter into the world with all of its messiness and dysfunction, a world where the Gospel we proclaim will be rejected far more than it is accepted, a world that is increasingly hostile or indifferent to the good news of Jesus Christ. *It's hard to be a saint in the city*, but our call is to be faithful in living as saints in the city, amid the people God loved so much that God gave his only Son so that everyone in every place may know that they are beloved children of God and can also live as saints, those who bear the light and love of Christ so that the darkness of this present age might give way to the brilliant life of our Lord who lived among us so that we might abide in the love of God that declares us to be blessed children of God, holy and precious in his sight all the days of our life.

Amen.