Luke 6: 20-31/Ephesians 1: 11-23 – All Saints Sunday

As you listened to the gospel lesson being read, you may have been reminded of the Sermon on the Mount as found in the book of Matthew. You know the one. “Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, or “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” The reading that you just heard from Luke is sometimes called “the Sermon on the Plain”, because it took place on level ground. And while the Sermon on the Mount gives us nine blessings, the Sermon on the Plain gives us four blessings and four woes.

Some people listen to these blessings and woes and they think that Jesus was giving the crowds of people a list of qualifications of how to get into heaven. Well, I can assure you that Jesus was not giving his audience a list of things to do so that they could earn their way into heaven. But wouldn’t it be nice if he did? Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus gave us a nice, concise list of what we had to do so that heaven could be ours? I mean, this is what our world has conditioned us for isn’t it? Our world has trained us to rely on the value of hard work and accomplishments. If we only had a “get into heaven” list, we could set about working hard to make sure that we accomplished each and every one of those things on that list.

And speaking of accomplishing things, our world puts value on accomplishments. I’m not saying for a second that this is always a bad thing either. We are proud, and rightly so, of our accomplishments. We hang our diplomas and degrees on our walls; we throw parties for those who have been promoted; and we proudly display our trophies on our shelves. And how many times have we heard the proud words of a child, “look what I can do!” Except for some people, for one reason or another, they don’t have any trophies to proudly display…..they never had the fortune to win one or they perhaps, never had a chance to even try for one. As I mentioned,
being proud in these types of things is not a bad thing….I like to think that God is happy for us too. But the danger comes from believing that only good things happen to those who accomplish something…..that you have to earn everything in this life of ours. This is what the world has conditioned us to believe and it influences us every day of our lives. This is the world’s way, but it is not God’s way.

God’s way runs counter to the way of the world. Jesus brought God’s way of ruling down to earth and this way turns the way of the world right on its head. What we thought we knew about power, abundance and riches has been shattered. It isn’t only those who have accomplished something that are rewarded…..it isn’t only those who have earned something that deserve to have full stomachs…..it isn’t only the ones who have lived in a fashion that is considered “right” who are joyful. All people deserve to be full, to be joyful, to be comfortable and to be loved, no matter what their condition in life is. This is God’s way, the way that Jesus taught us about and is teaching us about to this very day.

Today we celebrate All Saints Sunday. On this day we remember our dearly departed loved ones. On this day we think of them and how their lives had an effect on us. Almost every time I hear the phrase, “All Saints Sunday” I think of someone I know who couldn’t figure this day out. He would say, “why do you celebrate a Saints day when most people in the world aren’t saints? What about the rest of us?” My acquaintance was looking at All Saints Sunday through the world’s eyes. He was looking at this special day in our liturgical year through the lens of the world’s way. For him, the saints were the people of the past who had earned this title by doing something great or living a perfect or a near perfect life.
Today we remember our dearly departed. Today we remember our saints. Yes…..saints.
When we look at this day through the lens of God’s way we can see that saints are indeed the pure, the holy, and the perfect. Did I just call us all pure, holy and perfect? Yes, I sure did…..in the eyes of God we are pure, holy and perfect. In our reading from Ephesians today we heard the following. “In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will.” It isn’t us who accomplishes all things. It isn’t humanity who earns the title “saint”…..it has been giving to us. We are not saints because God values us higher than anyone else. We are not saints because we have lived perfect lives. We are saints…..and your dearly departed loved ones are saints because we have been blessed by God through Jesus.

On my dad’s gravestone it says, “loved by all who knew him.” This isn’t extraordinary and it isn’t even uncommon. Many people have that phrase on their gravestones. I have no memory of my dad as he died when I was two years old, but through stories of family and friends I came to learn that he was the kind of person who you always looked forward to seeing. He was the kind of person who brightened up every room he entered. I imagine that all of you know someone like that too. We light candles today, either up here in the front of the church or in our hearts, because the people that we remember touched us in some way. Maybe they lit up every room they entered…..maybe they were kind, hard-working people…..maybe they were spontaneous and fun people who would drop what they were doing in an instant in order to help someone in trouble…..maybe they taught you how to give and to forgive…..maybe they loved you in a special way that only they could, or maybe they had something to do with why you are sitting here today…..maybe they helped you along in your faith life.

As we remember our saints, please know that the living Christ was active in their lives.
God blessed them all with certain gifts and traits that allowed them to make the world a better place in which to live. They helped God’s kingdom…God’s way, to shine through into our own world. And please know as well that the kingdom of God is not “Heaven talk.” The kingdom of God is not one location. The kingdom of God is wherever God’s will is done. Your dearly departed saints helped in this way. And all of you are helping this to happen as well. Just as we can be assured that God’s departed saints are now in his everlasting embrace, we can be assured that we are also saints. We are all saints…..not only on this day of the year, not only on Sundays, but every day because the same living Christ that was active in the lives of our dearly departed saints is active in ours. We are saints when perhaps we are feeling rather saintly…..we are saints when we are feeling guilty…..we are saints in all ways and at all times because it doesn’t depend on us, and thankfully, it never did. And this is most definitely good news.

But there is more good news to be heard this day. As we gaze upon these candles…..as we feel the ache to once again be with those who are now departed, let us be comforted by knowing that God has made this possible. We will be re-united with them and there will be great joy. In anticipation of this, and by this hope, we can be eternally thankful to God. And how can we thank God for his amazing grace? We can take the trophy that he has won for us…..the trophy that each and every one of us has…..we can take that trophy down off the shelf, for it was never intended to rest there. The trophy that the living Christ won for us is not made of shiny metal, and formed plastic. This trophy is love…..love that was meant to be shared. Love that was shared by you and your dearly departed saints…..love that comes from God to us, washing over us like mighty ocean waves…..love that you and I are charged with sharing with all people. This is a trophy to be proud of. This is a trophy that all of us can be thankful for. When we share this trophy we give glory to the one who made it possible for us to be called saints…..even with all of our imperfections and faults. So, with the great cloud of saints that have gone before, let us raise up our voices with theirs…..let us give thanks to God who sees all of us…..on All Saints Sunday and every day as pure, holy and perfect. Amen.