

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
November 5, 2107

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Text: Matthew 5:1-12
Theme: Only the Mourning?

¹**When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:**

³**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

⁴**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.**

⁵**"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.**

⁶**"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

⁷**"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.**

⁸**"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.**

⁹**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**

¹⁰**"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

¹¹**"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

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In Nomine Jesu

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Time flies, these days. It seems like just yesterday, but it was a week ago Friday. Lots of Nativity folk gathered at Faith in North Palm Beach Gardens ... thankfully they hadn't totally closed Route 1 to traffic to repair the bridge less than a block away from Faith ... and I was really proud of those Nativity folk. They'd gathered for Maria Raffa's memorial service. Our contingent was almost equal in number to family members gathered and to members and guests of Faith who attended. Not that metrics are spiritually significant, but the witness surely was.

All were gathered to ... as the pastor reminded us in his sermon ... mourn.

I couldn't help but call that to mind as I pondered this text ... ironically it's the second time I preached on it here at Nativity this year. There's a free lunch on me for anybody that can recall the theme of that sermon ... just want to prove that I didn't pull this one out of any real or imagined sermon barrel. And to give ya'll a fighting chance, that one's theme included the word "senseless." This one doesn't. In fact it's a question: ONLY THE MOURNING?

Let's talk about in this text. There are nine categories of those called "blessed" in the New Revised Standard Version text we're using today. I did mention last January that the phrase "**Blessed are ...**" has the basic meaning of "**congratulations to.**"

Congratulations to those living according to the logic of God's reign. So hearing the beatitudes is like sitting in on an awards ceremony. Jesus takes his place at the head

table with the other VIPs – Mary Magdala, Peter, Andrew, and the rest – and he hands out the awards. Well, suffice it to say that what Jesus tells us in these verses repudiates and contradicts the teaching of this world. Want a contemporary example?

Our Synod's Interim Bishop, Marcus Lohrman, shared with us at my last Synod Council meeting [I chose not to run again with my term expiring last month] one of the calls that came from a pastor in trouble with his congregation. He'd gotten a signed petition from members of that pastor's congregation saying that he had deliberately chosen a text that brought politics into the pulpit and that this should never be tolerated ... it's even unpatriotic, they said. That text was today's text. Listen up. Jesus turns everything upside down.

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The world says, get rich. Get rich quick. Jesus says, get poor.

The world says, enjoy yourself, it's later than you think. Jesus says, blessed are those who mourn.

The world says, have a drink. Eat hearty. Jesus says, hunger and thirst.

This world's advertisers say, buy lots of things. This will make you happy. Jesus says, happy are the poor.

But let's think of it this way today. There's only one of those categories for congratulations and awards that involves everybody ... every single one of us. Not all of us are poor ... in either dollars or spirit. More of us might be meek, but for sure not all of us. Some of us hunger and thirst ... even die for it by the thousands in this world each day, but hunger and thirst for righteousness? Precious few. Pure in spirit? Check with the Weinsteins and Hefners of this world ... they're in the dark corners of more of our lives and heads and hearts than we might think ... and not just male heads and hearts. And let's count the peacemakers ... sure let's try. Or those being persecuted these days because they're on the "righteousness" side ... these days being on the "right" side is likelier to get you free of persecution. Now if you've been bullied or berated or betrayed falsely, you're part of a way too big group in our world, but how many of us can say we've never done the bullying, or berating, or betraying.

But then there's "mourning" ... not a one of us has not felt the pain and the depth of sense of loss that goes with mourning. Did a loved one die? Are you a diehard Dolphins fan? Does it bother you that ... whatever science you believe or disbelieve ... things have been getting hotter longer and more consistently than other cycles, streams are getting less wholesome for catching fish and lakes for swimming, you can't find a neighborhood that's predictably safe wherever you live if you want to be absolutely sure that no stray ... or correctly aimed and intentional ... bullets will find you or yours. Yup, there's lots to mourn.

And Jesus says, if you mourn you will be comforted. But in setting forth his "upside down from the world's ways" new way of life he says it's why you mourn and for what you mourn that gives you either "pat on the back, it'll be OK" comfort or "for sure and

forever and finally down deep God's king of comfort." And take a guess about which one we're talking about today.

There was a mother in the Far East, inconsolable in her grief. She'd lost her only son. She went to a shrine and prayed the lord Buddha to have her son back. What she was told was to take a begging bowl. Buddha said that she was to go to every house in the village. From every house where the family circle has not been broken by death, beg a peppercorn. When you come back at the end of the day with your bowl full, you'll have your son back.

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She went her way rejoicing and set out faithfully on her way. At the end of the day she returned without a single peppercorn in her bowl.

Yes, we all mourn our dead. Blessed are those who mourn, we hear Jesus say to us. There's not one of us here today who doesn't grieve over someone we have loved and lost recently or awhile ago. Not a family can be found here unbroken by death. We do mourn our dead.

And we do so especially on our annual All Saints Sunday worship. Some of you have offered the names of those whose death is most acutely painful for you today ... during the past year, over the years from year to year. Our mourning invites us to face the fact as Christians that death is not simply a process of nature but that it is indeed the wages of sin and the last enemy to be destroyed. Yet we spend billions of dollars trying to cover it up and pretend that it isn't so terrible after all. We cover it in cosmetics and flowers and fancy coffins.

And all the time Jesus is saying, blessed are those who mourn. Mourning means to realize ... to make real ... that there is only one thing worse. Spiritual death. Jesus teaches us not to be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather be afraid of God who can destroy both body and soul in hell. Those words are only a few pages further on in this Book of Matthew.

Blessed are those who see death for what it is, for they shall be comforted. Not mollycoddled. Not lulled into any false optimism. But *strengthened*. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be strengthened. Strengthened by the remembrance that Jesus who was a true, for real human who himself died. Really died. "Need to be buried" died ... in a sealed tomb to keep the decay and robbers away. But the remembrance is also for the third day ... he rose again from the dead and now lives and reigns to all eternity.

The comfort, the strength that all of us have with the sign of faith is Christ the Victor. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. We are one in him and with those we love in the mystical sweet communion of the company of the

saints ... this company of the saints ... the company whose names include those remembered among us today.

And as we mourn our dead, let's not forget to mourn for the way the world is ... filled with sin and pain. We might want to go through life with a superficial smile and proclaim "I'm OK; You're OK." That was last century's Transactional Analysis ... phsychology schools don't even teach it anymore except as a historically unavoidable memory of surface fixes.

It can't touch the mourning for us when we open our eyes to the tragedies of war, starvation, sickness, our human inhumanity to one another. And, yes, it needs to include our human cruelty and unheeding exploitation of God's created universe.

Among the saints we need to name this All Saints Sunday is Herbert Brokering – a prolific poet and song writer – who died this past year. Listen to what he wrote in "I Openers."

Once there was a church that prayed for their nation and for peace and the president at the end of the hour. Many people got restless because the prayers seemed so long. Now they have a television set in their church and they all pray when the news is on. There's one man who turns on the news very clearly, so everyone can see it. All the people say the words: Hear us and help us good Lord. They do it during the whole news broadcast. Even the ads.

That's mourning. It's being conscious of the way it really should be and the way it is. The evil conditions of the earth, though so widely tolerated, are intolerable to a saint. If you see God's family as your family, no human cross will be of indifference to you.

For those who have never heard of the love of God – those who ignore or reject the tears in things – they couldn't care less and their life turns into cynicism and despair. You see, if you don't care you can certainly avoid mourning. It's when you look at what is in the world and mourn for the way it might have been that you fulfill your sainthood and so are blessed. It's when you look at your own life and mourn for what you might have been that you are a saint. The beatitudes are spoke to saints. It's only when we face squarely and honestly the ravages of sin, death, and pain that comfort can be assured.

It's called All Saint's Day. That means it's your day too.

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN!

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Soli Deo Gloria