

Text: Luke 16: 20-31

Today's passage may sound very familiar to you. Classically, we know them as the Beatitudes, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of his ministry. The Beatitudes are actually contained in two of the gospels, Mark and today's version, in Luke. And there are some very distinct differences between the roles of both passages in each of the gospels.

I won't go into a huge dissertation on the differences between the two, because one, I have no idea where my notes from Seminary are and two, it would make for a really boring sermon to hear! I will say a bit about the gospel of Luke and the role our text today plays. Luke's gospel emphasizes God's impact on the world – what I like to call, “reality.” It is less about private spiritual matters, and more about the spiritual state of the world – how people are treated and how people ought to be treated, and how our society reflects such things.

Luke's beatitudes are given to the world as a blessing and challenge: the blessing is that God remains steadfast in remembering those who suffer at the hands of injustice and evil. Just as with Israel in the Old Testament, Jesus reminds people of God's steadfast love and promises – they are not forgotten. They are blessed. The challenge comes with the ways in which God carries out that blessing. It won't be through power or the powerful. Rather, it are ways like “turn the other cheek.” There's a reason for this challenge: God knows what power does, and how humans tend to use it. It's not to bless others, but rather to abuse, to control, and for accumulating more power.

Jesus' words in Luke are really a reality check – for his disciples then and for us today. There is certainly blessing in them for all people, rich or poor; powerful or marginalized. But the unavoidable fact is that they are a challenge to all people as well – and a challenge to us.

On this day we remember and give thanks for the saints, what does this mean?

Peace Lutheran Church is a small congregation located in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The church's recent story is all too familiar: church conflicts coupled with the reality less people are attending church these days, has led to questions about whether they could stay open....and how long they had until the decision was made for them. The congregation's members, however, decided to try something different. They decided they were going to offer help to anyone in the community - member, non-member, religious, atheist, anyone. They'd do yard work, landscaping, minor and even major home repairs like fixing roofs and plumbing. Their rationale, "if we're going to die, we might as well go out loving our neighbors." They put out about 700 fliers.

The area around Peace Lutheran is well known for its Midwest ethic of self-reliance. People don't ask for help, and they certainly don't ask for help with the expectation nothing is expected in return. So the people of Peace figured that they'd get few takers – and they were right. Only two elderly ladies responded. But they kept at it, and as you would expect, word got around, more people asked for help, and in fact, more people have asked TO HELP, joining the ranks of Peace Lutheran's team of helpers in the community.

Peace still is struggling....finances are still lean and they still wonder about their existence. However, what they have done is in their efforts to love their neighbor, gotten their neighbors to love their neighbors.

So why did I tell you this story?

God's message for you today: You don't have to be dead to be a saint.

So often when we talk about saints, we talk about those we've lost. The traditional focus of this Sunday is proof of that. Sainthood is a reward, a status earned, only after you die. It's similar to the Medal of Honor we bestow on military service members. We often joke that a requirement for the award is that you have to die to "earn it." The truth is, however, that there are many heroes, many who have served with honor who do not wear a medal, do not hold the title. The same is true of sainthood. Death is not a requirement. And sainthood is not a title or something to be "earned." Sainthood is really about our identity in baptism....and how we live out our baptisms. Baptismal identity is knowing that while death is a reality we face every day, we are called to live and uphold and support life for others. Living out our baptisms is choosing the call to life in the face of death's reality.

Our willingness to do that takes courage. Courage God reckons as faith. And it is faith and faith alone that qualifies us as saints.

Saints of God, you're not dead yet. You're part of a living, moving body....the Body of Christ. And may God bless you richly as you go about the business of sainthood each day.
Amen.