



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 5, 2017  
ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

## The Best Is Yet To Come Matthew 5:1-12; I John 3:1-3

An old ne'er do well named Tom died in a little town in Tennessee. He had never been good to his wife, neglected his children, had never darkened the door of a church, and was hardly sober a day of his adult life. When he died, he had a graveside service. In this particular town, there was a sage who was always called upon to say a few words when someone died whom he had known all his life. People wondered what the sage would say about the old reprobate when none of them had ever seen anything good about him. The appointed hour arrived and the sage stood at the head of the grave and said, "Well now, Beloved, you know Tom wasn't as bad all the time as he was most of the time!"<sup>1</sup>

I am fortunate that I have not had to speak anything like those words over any of our friends who have died and stepped across the threshold of life into eternity, but I have known of a few people through the years who might warrant such a send off! I can only hope that when that day comes for me, someone will be kind enough to say something at least that generous about me.

Sometimes we ministers are criticized for making someone sound far better in death than they actually were in life. It is true that when we gather to celebrate the lives of our friends who have died, we tend to focus on the best aspects of their lives, the values they held, the characteristics that made them shine, and the good deeds that brought to the fore the very best of who they were. We don't spend a lot of time focusing on the flaws and shortcomings of our dearly departed, primarily because we all know them and we all share them. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we all are saved by grace, so I think it is far more beneficial for us to focus on the positive attributes of a person.

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Lee Morris, "The Old Reprobate," in *The Preacher Joke Book*, Loyal Jones, ed. (Little Rock: August House, Inc., 1989), 71; adapted.

The things that other people have done well in life are the traits we prefer to remember and which will long serve to inspire us to better living. The “Saints of God,” among whom we are numbered, are not a perfect bunch and far from it. Yet, hopefully, we are moving in a direction that will make us worthy of being called “the holy ones of God.”

Surely that is what Jesus had in mind when he preached to the crowd on the hillside by the Sea of Galilee. I doubt it was the only time he shared these words and, more likely than not, the people who followed him from place to place heard these things dozens of times. Fortunately, Matthew and Luke believed they were important enough to write down and pass on to us.

The Sermon on the Mount, as we know the larger passage from Matthew’s Gospel, is a primer on how to live as a child of God in the world. Jesus covers a lot of ground and it has been suggested that if we ever master what is said here, we have understood what it means to follow Christ.

The portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we know best is the section known as “The Beatitudes.” They are pithy and, quite frankly, sometimes puzzling statements that are intended to encourage us toward a certain kind of behavior in the world. Jesus had been healing some of the people who had followed him to a deserted spot. He went up on the hillside and looked at the crowd before him. He saw a lot of familiar faces: faces of the poor, the insecure, the hungry, the sad, the frustrated, the oppressed, and the hopeless.

He felt compassion for them and wanted them to know that there were better days ahead, that their sorrow would not last forever, their poverty would disappear, their sense of self would be bolstered, and their place in the world would improve. He began to preach and used a familiar word—*makarios*—a word we often translate as “blessed.” We all want to be blessed, to experience the favor of God and to enjoy some of the good things that are available in life. “Blessed are you . . .” would be a good thing for any of us to hear.

More likely than not, however, what the people sitting and standing in front of Jesus heard him say was something like, “Happy are you . . . .” Happy? Happy for being poor in spirit or low in the pocketbook? Happy for being sad? Is he suggesting that if we are persecuted or insecure or struggling for justice that we should just put on a happy face and go about our business? Why should anyone who heard Jesus’ words so long ago rejoice

for being in the circumstance in which they found themselves: citizens of a poor nation, oppressed by a foreign government, and besieged by an overbearing and arrogant religious hierarchy? What is so cheerful about that?

Jesus, I think, had something else in mind. Far from suggesting that we take whatever life, or anyone else, throws at us with a smile, he was suggesting that we go deeper within ourselves and find that inner joy that is the wellspring of our hope. Jesus was nudging the people around him, prodding them, poking them to open their eyes and look around. Despite the hard times and the unpleasant conditions, God was still with them. In fact, God was with them in a very tangible and powerful way through Jesus himself! God had not forgotten them but was standing in their midst. That reality is a cause for deep joy even when circumstances are not happy or even tolerable.

Jesus was encouraging his people to take inventory of their own lives and to see the best within themselves, to discover what God had already given to them. When they did, they should use those gifts to make the world better for everyone. The Beatitudes are a guide for better living for us all. They encourage us not to give up or give in, but to live into Christ.

After my mom's death, we received so many kind and generous, comforting and helpful cards. The printed sentiments and your handwritten encouragement continue to mean so much to me. One of those cards had these words: "Remember all that she gave you. She will be at the heart of your life's story forever."<sup>2</sup>

Whoever came up with those lines was right. The people we remember today and all of the others whom we will never forget are at the heart of our life's story and always will be. I think Jesus would agree. I also think that what he was trying to get across to the people sitting in the warm sunshine by the glistening blue sea is that they—and you and I— are also at the heart of someone else's life story and we need to live like it! Be joyful for you are blessed.

If we are at the heart of someone else's life story, then we need to pay attention to our lives. If we are poor in spirit and recognize that we need to mature in our faith, then we ought to do so. When we mourn, we realize that it is because we love and that love has been wounded. The joyful news is,

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<sup>2</sup>© Hallmark Cards, Inc.

however, that as we continue to love other people, we will find the comfort we need.

Meekness is not weakness; rather, it is an honest understanding of who we are—good and not-so-good. True meekness is a strength that comes out of our knowing who we are and not trying to be something that we are not. We can be joyful in who God created us to be and continue to discover who that wonderful person is.

The desire for justice and doing what is right in the world is a trait we all should cultivate. Righteousness is treating another human being as the child of God he or she is. Great joy comes from bringing justice into any situation.

Having mercy is acting out of an awareness of the ways in which we are flawed and giving others the same grace we want for ourselves. It does not excuse sin. It does not look the other way at wrongdoing. Instead, it is, as one person has said, “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.” Being merciful toward one another is trying to bring out the presence of God in one another. This kind of action flows, I think, from a pure heart. A pure heart sees the world through God’s eyes and acts in the world as God would act. What joy we would experience if we accepted this blessing from God!

Peacemaking is an art and not easily achieved. It is the work of reconciliation, bringing people, communities, nations, even the world, back together. It is helping us reunite with God. Peacemaking is a joyful art, one that we should all try from time to time.

Jesus was not simply a bright-eyed optimist. He knew that trying to live right in the world often brought negative results—even persecution and death. Many of the prophets had suffered when they tried to do what called on them to do. Jesus himself would die trying to bring goodness and truth to the world. Still, living well brings a joyful assurance that we are doing what we were created to do.

There are special people who are at the heart of our life’s story. They lived and loved in such a way as to inspire us to better living. Each of us will be at the heart of someone else’s life story. It behooves us to live and love in such a way as to guide them toward better living. The Beatitudes remind us that the best is yet to come because we are all blessed by God. Be happy. Rejoice and live as the gift of God that you are!

November 5, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who holds all of life in your hands, in our times of worship and in all the circumstances of our lives, we stand in awe of the generosity of your gifts to us, and with grateful hearts, we offer to you our thanks and praise. We give you thanks that you have called out faithful witnesses and have continued to reveal your truth for generations. And we give you thanks that you call us and speak to us in this place and for our own time. Make of us faithful hearers and doers of your Word. Disturb our ways of living and thinking until they are one with your ways. Stretch and challenge us through your call to a costly discipleship and cradle us in the strong arms of your mercy. Speak to us in the majesty of your creation and whisper to us in a still, small voice, so that you will not be hidden from us, but that we might recognize your work in our world and in our lives. We praise you, O God, for your grace that continues to pursue us and your love that will not let us go.

Living God, who is our light and hope, on this All Saints Day, we thank you for the gift of eternal life and for all those who, having served you well, now rest from their labors. We thank you for all the saints remembered and forgotten, for those dear souls most precious to us, and especially for those we have remembered today. We praise you for their lives and their love and rejoice that they now see you face to face and rest in the vastness of your mercy. May their witness inspire us to a deeper and more active faith, worthy of the example they have set for us. By the lives they lived and the lessons they taught, let us recognize what it means to be called your children.

As we prepare to respond to the suffering around us and to offer compassion to others in your name, often feeling inadequate to meet the needs we encounter, remind us that the fullness of who we are has not yet been revealed, so we trust in your provision and grace. And as we prepare to gather around your table, remind us that we are your saints not by our own inclination or strength but through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ our Savior, in whose name we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister

## All Saints Memorial Liturgy

The Homily

Dr. Wright

There is a prayer that I offer at almost every funeral. It was written by Blair Gilmer Meeks and, to me, is one of the sincerest prayers on the occasion of death I have come across. It acknowledges that God holds us from birth to death and beyond. It offers thanksgiving for the life of the person who has died and asks for a new awareness of God's presence in our world. It seeks hope in the days to come. All of these prayers are good and helpful and familiar. There is one line which I always seem to pray with a bit more intensity:

Give us courage to commit this loved one to your keeping,  
in steadfast hope of the coming day of resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

I have learned that when death comes we have to recognize that someone we love is no longer present. We cannot see them. We cannot talk with them. We cannot hold them. As much as we do not like it, we have no control over the reality of their being gone from us.

Rev. Meek's prayer reminds me that we do have control over one thing, and that is our trusting God with the life God created and has received back to himself. "Give us courage to commit this loved one to your keeping." It is only by courage that we can trust God to take on what we can no longer do. It takes courage to let go, courage that most of us do not readily have. It comes incrementally most of the time, when we are ready for it.

Like you, I have known death for most of my life. I have learned this year that there are different deaths that come with our various relationships. As you know, last spring my mother died. About six weeks ago, a dear friend died, a fellow minister only a few years older than I. I have accepted these deaths. I know why they happened. I know that in both cases death prevented further suffering. But I haven't yet received the courage to fully trust them to God's keeping. I know they are in the full presence of God, but I haven't gotten to the point of having enough courage to let God do what I cannot do.

The prayer reminds us that we need courage to commit a loved one into God's keeping . . . "in steadfast hope of the coming day of resurrection." Our

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<sup>3</sup>Blair Gilmer Meeks, *Standing in the Circle of Grief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 80.

courage is born from hope which is grounded in the gift of eternal life granted to us all.

Perhaps you, like I, still need a little more courage to trust God with death as well as life. That is why we are here. Together, perhaps, our encouragement of one another will bring us the gift of courage. Let us pray so.

Today we remember those persons who lived among us as the saints of God and offer thanksgiving once again for their lives. We light a candle in their memory as a testimony to our belief that their light continues to shine in the presence of God:

#### The Naming of Our Beloved Saints

Anne Bailey  
Jackie Raper  
June Shearin

Ernest Bridgers  
Robbie Robbins

Ann Moore Morton  
Don Scalf  
Lambert Sutton

We remember family members who have died in the past year.

We remember friends who have died in the past year.

We remember those persons who died in years past and are still dear to us.

We remember those persons who died this year due to natural disasters.

We remember those persons who died this year by human violence.

God grant them all eternal rest and light everlasting. Amen.

#### The Kindling of the Flames

You are invited to come forward and light a candle in memory of a loved one from your circle of friends or family, especially if the death has occurred during the past year. You may also light a candle for someone who died years ago, but whose memory is still bright for you. Deacons will be at the head of the center aisle to provide candles, light them, and help you place them in the chancel area.