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St. James', Mt. Airy
11/5/17

All Saints A
Revelation 7:9-17
Psalm 34:1-10, 22
1 John 3:1-3
Matthew 5:1-12

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, and in doing so we enter into a thin space.

There is a liminality we recognize today that is always present when we gather to worship and come close to God, but which we pay special attention to in our celebration of the communion of saints.

It is perhaps no surprise, knowing this, that the Gospel we read today is Matthew's Beatitudes – for this scripture brings us close to the already-and-not-yet character of the Kingdom of God.¹

The Beatitudes is one of the most well-known pieces of scripture. Twenty centuries of Christian repetition will do that, but even biblically illiterate 21st century Westerners recognize them as the kind of words Jesus is supposed to say. For us, they are likely so familiar to many of us that they have become a sage chestnut we pick up and remember together with a knowing nod.²

¹ Tim Beach-Verhey, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*.

² Allen Hilton, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*.

And so it is that when we hear them it is easy to let them wash over us, to enjoy them like a sort of scriptural comfort food, instead of paying attention to how they tell us something essential about faithful living.

That something is found by digging a bit at the roots of this passage. Most scholars believe the Beatitudes come in part from a source called Q – what is hypothesized to be an early collection of Jesus’ sayings that was used as a source by the writers of both Matthew and Luke, but has been lost to us.

Matthew and Luke both contain versions of the Beatitudes – Luke’s Sermon on the Plain features only four beatitudes, followed by four corresponding woes, while Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount includes nine beatitudes and no woes.

But another source for Matthew, which is known as the most Jewish of the Gospels, is likely Psalm 1. This is important for us, because using Psalm 1 as a lens for Matthew’s Beatitudes breaks open our understanding of the word *blessed*.

There are two Hebrew words for blessed – *barak* and *‘ashar* with slightly different meanings.

Barak means to “bow or stoop” as in Psalm 103, “Bless the Lord my soul” – “Bow to the Lord.”

Psalm 1 uses the word *‘ashar*, which means in its literal sense “to find the right road”³ – as in “You are on the right road when you walk not in the way of unrighteousness but in the way of the Law of God.”

³ Earl F. Palmer, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*.

Hear the Beatitudes again, with this intent behind them:

You are on the right road when you are poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

You are on the right road when you mourn, for you will be comforted.

You are on the right road when you are meek, for you will inherit the earth.

You are on the right road when you hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled.

You are on the right road when you are merciful, for you will receive mercy.

You are on the right road when you are pure in heart, for you will see God.

You are on the right road when you are a peacemaker, for you will be called child of God.

You are on the right road when you are persecuted for righteousness; sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

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

As one theologian puts it, this is hard work – **staying on this path** – but each blessing also contains a promise, and what Jesus is calling us into in following him on this journey is radical caring.

So it is, that we join the throng of saints who have trod this road before us. This road is liminal space – that threshold between what has been, what is, and what shall be.

It is something we partake in every week when we gather around this altar and share communion – telling the story that our forebears in faith have been telling for centuries to come close to God and one another.

It is something we share in whenever we call on the Spirit to be present and to bless us – to help us find the right road – like we do when we baptize people and bring them into the family of families we call the church, like we will today with James Patrick Brown.

It is why we gather together the pledges of our gifts to this community – a recognition of those who came before us in faith and called a community into being here in Mt. Airy.

It is why we began our service today reading the names of our beloved departed. We know the importance of surrounding ourselves with those who have travelled the road with generous hearts and have shown us the way.

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I'd like to close today with a benediction from the Iona community in Scotland, as a blessing for the road ahead as we make our way:

May God, the brightness of the universe, bless us.

May Jesus, the light of the world, disturb us.

May the Holy Spirit, energy of the cosmos, strengthen us.

May we be blessed with the power to speak and live the gospel all of our days.

~ AMEN ~