

**Begin with Blessings**  
**All Saints Sunday**

I wonder if when Jesus shared the Beatitudes with his disciples they had been in this new ministry together for about seven months. Seven months since the disciples left all that was familiar and decided to follow Jesus. During these days they have experienced and encountered a world that they had never imagined. As they have traveled with Jesus throughout Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and from the areas beyond the Jordan River they have met people with diseases and heard stories of family members who had it before them, they have met people in deep pain and stood present before them and listened, they've seen people possessed by demons and witnessed the terror this incites, James and Zebedee sat quietly with a man as he told them about his last epileptic seizure and how he lived in fear of the next one. Peter sat beside a boy who was paralyzed, his heart breaking as he listened. Andrew stood by Jesus and watched in wonder as his words and actions created healing and reconciliation.

As the disciples follow Jesus, as they encounter people, hear their stories, and feel a deep engagement with the challenges and joys of their lives; they have more questions than answers. Some days they yearn for the old times when their days consisted of getting up early, mending the nets and heading out into the water to fish. The life of a fisherman is not easy, in fact they had worked extremely hard, however each day had a rhythm and predictability and they had an awareness of what was within their control and what was not. Sometimes on these days with Jesus, there is nothing that happens as they expect it will.

Traveling with Jesus they'd been to isolated villages where there was no care for those who were sick, they'd been in big cities and met people who lived in such a state of poverty that it was hard to not look away. They'd dined with people with great wealth and power but who had no interest in sharing their resources, they were immersed in a world that seemed to have far more that was unfair, unjust and unmerciful; and much less that was righteous and kind and pure. They saw and experienced discrimination based on their religious beliefs, communities that divided themselves into hierarchies and the extremes they went to maintain these divisions. They were living a life where they did not know what the next day would bring, They had not witnessed such sadness before, they had not heard cries for justice, they had not seen such chaos and uncertainty. What would Jesus ask of them next? What would the people they met ask of them? They felt unmoored from even the most basic sources of order and mercy; dislocated, isolated, and confused.

Jesus looked at his disciples, he looked at the ever gathering crowds and he headed up a mountain. He sat down among the trees and the disciples sat around him. He saw their emotional and physical distress, their uncertainty and inner restlessness, he saw their spiritual exhaustion, their confusion about inhabiting a world that was far from their expectations, and the disciples felt Jesus' gaze upon them, they felt his compassion and love and they saw a glimmer of hope, they saw a sliver of light. And then Jesus began to speak. "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad. Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth. Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full. Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy. Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God. Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children. Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad because you have great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you."

And even though, this still was confusing to the disciples, what they now knew in their hearts, in their bones, because they had been living it, was that when they were feeling hopeless, God

showed up, when their grief left them wrung out with despair, somehow they were held in holiness, when they were humbled by all they did not know or understand, they felt the strength that came from the willingness to be present to all that immediate moment held, when they felt the deep thirst of righteous anger and the bitter frustration of injustice and oppression, they had seen how God was on the side of the least of these, they had felt the love of God in and through them when they showed mercy to the sick, they had looked with wonder when it seemed the most unlikely person most purely expressed love and joy for them, for their neighbor, for themselves. The child like way that some worked from peace, able to make connections and allow for differences, they saw amazing acts of courage as people worked and fought and demanded justice. They had felt the sting of criticism and accusation, they had felt the fear of being harassed and misunderstood and yet here they sat, on a mountain, under the trees, under a moon lit sky with Jesus and they knew, they were blessed, they were happy.

As they sit there with Jesus, they feel the heavy layers of grief and loss letting go and as they listen they begin to reconnect with the sacredness of what it means to be a human alive on the planet at this time. They feel themselves rooted in the present moment, they feel the divine love of God that is not dependent on current events, but in the holy presence that moves with us that is in us.

Jesus continues to speak and when he is done, they are again surrounded by a huge crowd. Can you place yourself there? crane your neck to get a glimpse of Jesus? what is it you most want him to know? As he catches your eye and looks into your soul, can you open your heart to his revolutionary love? See Jesus beckoning you to join the circle, to sit down with the other disciples.

Bring with you to this circle all that this year has brought and taken from you, the fear and anxiety, the loneliness and isolation, sadness and disappointment. Your tiredness at having to learn new ways to do things, the grief that at times hollows you out. Let all of this be held in Jesus' love. See Peter looking up and saying, "I remember the words from Psalm 56: God, you yourself have kept track of my misery. Put my tears into your bottle—aren't they on your scroll already? Then my enemies will retreat when I cry out. I know this because God is mine. God: whose word I praise. The Lord, whose word I praise I trust in God; I won't be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

As we live in this time of cultural dislocation, may we keep coming back to the anchor we have in the love of Christ, the place we have in his circle of love. Lighting the candles for our beloved family members and friends, so many images will fill our minds. Times of laughing together, of being at Beersheba and Junaluska, Sunday school, UMW, of babies held, baptized and celebrated, of confirmation, of weddings and funerals, and the ones we could not have; we see where they sat in the pews, sang in the choir, chaired committee after committee, worshiped at 8:15 or 10:30, how their presence brightened the room, how their love softened hearts, how their eyes filled with love when they saw you. We see the beauty of things made by their hands, the tray of cookies they made for Feast of Lights. Kneeling together at the Communion rail, we hear the music they made, the music they loved to hear, we hear southern accents so beautiful and distinct... we will never forget. We remember how their life made a difference to us, how we were in awe and humbled by what they overcame, how they lived, their quiet dignity, their joyful laugh, all that they were and are to us, everyone a child of God. We remember we are together in the circle of Christ's love; we are Christ's beloved community, the whole cloud of saints eternally beside us and with us and abiding in God's embrace.

Christ's love for us begins with a blessing, and the blessing continues as the circle grows and grows. Blessed are you; blessed are you; blessed are you. Amen.