

Saints Out of Sinners Matthew 5:3-6

If Chester Bitterman were alive today he'd be 56 years old. But terrorists kidnapped Chet in Bogotá Columbia on January 19, 1981. They accused the organization he worked for, Wycliffe Bible Translators, as being a front for the CIA. They gave Wycliffe Bible Translators one month to leave Columbia in exchange for Chet's life. But Wycliffe chose to stay. Their goal as you know is to translate the Bible, which challenges people to love their enemies, into all languages.

But the waiting was agonizing. Would the terrorists release Chet and let him get on with his life's dream? Seven weeks later the answer came. In the early morning hours of March 7, 1981, Chet's body was found in an abandoned bus with a single bullet through his chest. We don't know what Chet's last words were but we do know some of his thoughts on life and death before he was kidnapped.

A note scrawled on his desk calendar found months after his murder, read: "There are times when God expects us to take a hard cold stand for Him. And just like Daniel and his friends in the Bible (Daniel 3), we have no guarantee of the outcome. We may have to lay our life on the line."

"Some people have the mistaken notion that Christians are people who are expected to float merrily, merrily down the stream, that we never have any stress, that we never have any problems," Chet reminded his parents on his last tape mailed to them, and it didn't arrive until after he had been taken captive. "But that's not the Christian life at all," he continued. "The Christian life is full of stress. Look at the good Christians. They've all had lots of stress, both internally and externally."

There will be times when we can't rid ourselves of stress because God wants us to go through it. Remember when Jesus said, "If it be thy will, let this cup pass from me." Christ didn't want to go to the cross but he was bound to God by God's will and love even though it included death.

We have to realize that there are some situations that we're going to have to go through that are hard and difficult. But terrible circumstances can end in ultimate good when they transform us to the image of Christ.

My deepest desire is to live my life so as to bring Christ the honor and glory he deserves. God owes me nothing. He has no need of me. But he loves me and has chosen to lower himself to my level and this causes me to well up with spontaneous praise and joy.

Contrast that with the life of a man named Wesley Todd Allen. He was sentenced to die by hanging in 1993. What makes this case controversial is not that he was hung. He deserved it. He abused and killed in 1989 three small children ages 11, 10 and 4 with no sign of remorse. Even after he was caught, Dodd said that if he were freed he would kill and rape again and enjoy every minute of it.

But before the hangman's noose was put around his head, Dodd talked about a new found faith that he believed granted him eternal life. His last words on the gallows expressed hope in Jesus Christ.

"I was asked by somebody, if there was anyway that sex offenders could be stopped," he said in the minute before the noose was placed around his neck. "I said, no. I was wrong. I said there was no hope, no peace. There is peace. There is hope. I found both in the Lord Jesus Christ."

The murdered boy's parents expressed disgust at the 11th hour conversion. To them and others, it's difficult to perceive someone capable of monstrous crimes repenting at the last minute.

A crucial tenant of the Christian faith is that all of us depend on God's grace in Jesus Christ as the basis of our salvation and that's unlimited. So no one is beyond reach of God's grace in this lifetime. We remember the man on the cross who at the last minute was granted paradise. "Today you will be with me in paradise."

What the church does on All Saints Sunday is to take out the family album and remember some of God's people, the saints, past and present in the family of God. Not necessarily their great lives, but who they trusted in their life given to them in Jesus Christ.

In Mathew 3:3-6, the word you come across there is "blessed". First, the emphatic adjective "blessed" is the equivalent of "saved" or "redeemed". It does not merely mean "happy" or "congratulations". For people to be blessed in this context means they have received God's salvation that has come into the world in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus pronounces to certain people why they have been blessed.

So, the reign of heaven in Jesus belongs to the poor in Spirit. Final comfort will come from Jesus to those who are presently mourning.

Jesus will grant the inheritance of the renewed earth to the lowly, and in Jesus God will set all things right and so satisfy the hunger of those who long for God to act.

The people named in this portion of Scripture are the poor in spirit, the mourning, the lowly, the hungry and thirsty. These are all descriptions of human need, inability, and emptiness. They are not, I repeat, positive virtues! To be poor in Spirit is to be in the condition of having nothing to offer God, and no way to save oneself (poor). To mourn is to acknowledge that the world is broken, and I am poor in spirit! To be lowly (not meek or gentle) in a positive sense is to be powerless and having to look to God for salvation. When people realize that they are powerless to save themselves or redeem the world, then they hunger for God's righteousness, that is, for God to set the world right as he has promised.

In the first four Beatitudes, then, Jesus proclaims that those who have nothing are precisely the ones who receive everything from God. This is true in the present. The reign of heaven is theirs and it will be true on the last day.

They will be comforted.

They will inherit.

They will be satisfied.

To gain access to these promises, then, one bows the knee and says, "Yes, this is true, I have nothing to offer God. But I believe I shall receive everything from Him for the sake of the cross and empty tomb for all of us, and who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

The world is broken and there's no way around it. In Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark we are asked to repent (the reality that we bring nothing that God needs.) We repent because God the King has come to fix things. Jesus calls you and me to participate in what God is doing. And in the ministry of Jesus He starts repairing the broken world and He starts filling empty lives.

In our world today, and in our lives, no pretending is allowed now. It is easier to pretend when life is physically comfortable, and somewhat predictable, and you keep your standard of living lower than God's.

But the things that need to be fixed, in our lives and in our world are simply beyond our control.

So Jesus is talking about you, and about me. Do you believe that? The disciples are there and have begun to repent and believe that they are poor in spirit, mourning, lowly, and hungry for God to put things right.

The crowds are there, and there's a mixed bag. They're astonished. But will they believe that Jesus is talking about them?

What about you and me? Am I really and truly poor in spirit? Are my hands actually and completely empty?

God's gifts are for those who come to Him completely empty. He is not just a helper, or an improver, He came to save. He healed, He cast out demons, He forgave sins. He turned away only those who thought they had something to offer.

Jesus brings God's reign to us today. The King dies to take away yours and my sins.

The King rises to begin a new creation, and guarantee the last day.

The King sends His Spirit to be in His disciples, and to work through us.

Jesus will bring God's kingly reign on the day when mourning is over and hunger and thirst are satisfied.

To follow Jesus is to see the brokenness of life and of the world, and mourn and long for the right.

To follow Jesus is to offer yourself as an instrument to be used for the blessing of others.

We come to God bringing nothing...empty hands are filled. Longing hearts look for the last day. Once filled with Jesus' gifts then our hands become His hands for others...merciful...making peace.

Soren Kierkegaard expressed himself on saints this way: "God creates out of nothing." Wonderful, you say. Yes, to be sure, but He does something still more wonderful, He makes saints out of sinners. We celebrate that today.

We thank God today for those saints, some living and some dead, who shared with us God's love in Christ. Their lives were in Christ and the rest took care of itself.

Praise God, for the Holy Spirit, who empowers us in Word and Sacrament, that we indeed are saints, the holy ones of God, and enables us to live that out in our lifetimes this sharing of the love of God in Jesus Christ, as the Communion of Saints. Amen.

To the saints at First Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

David E. Hinck, assistant to the associate!