

Sermon by

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Join me in a flight of fancy, if you will, that imagines that just now you and I have been transposed to the timeless Great Hall of Saints. In this awesome, gigantic space we find ourselves surrounded by saints of all Christian centuries. Strange thing: we have already been in this great hall long enough to have our bearings and curiosity in tact. From where we sit, it's hard to see much besides other common looking people. So let's saunter forth from our modest location to find out who's who and what's what. Did you notice that there's no preferential seating, no gilded boxes perched up high for a spectacular view of the stage. There aren't even super-dressed stars being ushered down to plush front row seats. Rather there is an overwhelming sense of hospitality and authenticity. People are thrilled to be here, to be greeting their Christian brothers and sisters from other continents and eras. Do you see some of the more famous saints, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Theresa of Liseaux, St. Peter, or Hildegard? My, how privileged we are to be in this crowd.

Although this scene is a figment of my imagination, it is a depiction of the throng that we have joined as Christians. We come once again to this saintly gathering of Christian worship. Perhaps when you read St. Paul's letters to the young Christian churches, you notice that he often greets them as saints. In fact, the letter to the Ephesians begins, "to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus. Indeed we are saints consecrated to the worship and service of God. God has called us out of the ordinary into the extraordinary. He calls us into a topsy turvy understanding of blessedness.

In our Gospel reading from Luke this morning, we heard a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Makarios, the Greek word for blessed, means how fortunate one is. Jesus repeats makarios over and over again to encourage the disciples into a new life. How fortunate, he says, are those who are poor and hungry. How could that be? We don't envy the physically poor nor those who go to bed hungry. So are we excluded from this blessing since we are neither poor in worldly goods nor physically hungry? I don't think so. In the eyes of Jesus we are poor and hungry, even though we may not acknowledge it. We are poor because of our controlling efforts to manage our lives. We believe that we can create our own sense of happiness, of good fortune. We delude ourselves into believing that ever increasing assets, ever larger homes for our stuff, ever fancier vacations will bring us happiness and fulfillment. There is no guarantee of this. Rather we can easily become preoccupied with gathering, collecting, amassing and enlarging our worldly portion. It is this preoccupation which may leave us spiritually poor. We find it difficult

to carve out time for focused prayer or family devotions. We settle for interrupted prayers at traffic lights and rely on Sunday worship to carry us through harried weeks. Meanwhile those who live in physical poverty with no hope of becoming materially rich like us, often have the time and the inclination to pursue God earnestly. Ten years or so ago, several US senators hosted a reception in honor of Mother Theresa. One senator in particular was both inspired and confused by Mother Theresa's work in Calcutta. In a private moment, he asked her how she could be so enthusiastic about her ministry among the poor and dying when these people died from neglect, malnutrition and starvation. Mother Theresa at 4'10" stood very erect as she gazed up at the towering 6' tall senator and replied, "Senator, God calls us to be faithful not to be successful!"

The Beatitudes remind us that we have choices to make. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." This is a warning that we who are rich need to divest of our wealth, IF it prevents us from finding our primary security and fortune in God. I have the privilege of knowing someone here at Augustana, who is redirecting his efforts away from an impressive career towards investing time and effort in deepening his journey with his Lord. He describes it as being similar to yoga, "just stretch a little more each time, risk becoming more dependent on God, just let go, let go, let go. He has concluded that our culture's incessant message about money bringing security is lacking in deeper meaning and a more everlasting security.

Many parents as they wonder about their children's future in this troubled world, say that they just want their children to be happy. Happy as in the Beatitudes sense of "how fortunate"? Happy as in "let go, let go, let go"? Happy as in "do unto others as they do unto you"? Happy as in pursuing faithfulness even at the cost of success? Even though we are competing with a different media message, we have an obligation to our youth to pass on the message of the Beatitudes. Recently I was dashing through a shopping mall but came to a dead standstill as I read and reread the poster messages on the GAP store windows. Three large posters announced the power of an individual to change the world, of a family to change the world, and of the power of giving the shirt off one's back to make a difference! This sounds like the Beatitudes to me with a challenge to walk an extra mile, to lift up those less fortunate, to believe that we can make a difference.

Yes, it is these ways of happiness to which we as saints are called. Jesus challenges us to be different, even as he was. He is asking no more of us than he gave to us. He did good to those who hated him, he prayed for his enemies, he walked the extra mile, he gave much better than he got.

In a very few minutes we will be remembering with deep thanksgiving the lives of treasured members and friends of our Augustana community. They have nurtured and inspired us in many different ways. Some introduced us to our faith because they were our parents, grandparents or Sunday School teachers; some represent to us the best of what Christianity is about as they generously gave and forgave, as they practiced

kindness and patience, as they offered undeserving love time and time again. Others are celebrated for their big hearts, their support of the downtrodden, their concern for the prisoner, widow and orphan. The descriptions of saintly work are inspiring and endless. May we yearn to tread closely along the same well trod paths. As St. Paul hopes, may we “know what is the hope to which Christ calls us”. May we remain steadfast in our commitments.

While we are not yet in the timeless Great Hall of Saints, we have joined the long line. We are on active duty now, serving in our varied callings, finding great fortune and blessing and happiness in our pursuits. As we move forward, may we pray for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, not only for ourselves and for Augustana, but for all Christians worldwide, those saintly sisters and brothers currently living and ministering on other continents. Yes, as we give thanks for the saints we love so dearly, may we also praise God for his immeasurable power and grace.