

November 5, 2023

All Saints' Day

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

In his book, "Falling Upward," which our Book of 2 Months Club is currently reading, Fr. Richard Rohr ponders: "I have always wondered why people never want to put a stone monument of the Eight Beatitudes on the courthouse lawn. Then I realize," he continues, "that the Eight Beatitudes of Jesus would probably not be very good for any war, any macho worldview, the wealthy, or our consumer economy."¹

In other words, Fr. Rohr recognizes what many scholars do about Jesus' teaching that we have come to call The Beatitudes – that they are wildly countercultural - historically as much as in our time

Oswaldo Vena, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL writes: "Going against the official theology [of his contemporaries, Jesus] blesses those who were despised by the society of the time. He turns the values of his time on their head by announcing that God blesses the unblessed."²

Eric Barreto, Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary in N.J. adds to this conversation as he writes: the "blessings are deceptively simple, for they imagine—with an economy of words but a depth of hard-won conviction—a world turned upside down."³

The Beatitudes continue to be a striking lesson from Jesus because they continue to be countercultural, they continue to imagine a world turned upside down

I don't mean to sound like a broken record in my preaching by pointing out how countercultural Jesus' ministry and message were but I am feeling a bit indignant

¹ Rohr, Richard. *Falling Upward*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. 2011

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/all-saints-sunday/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-10>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-51-12-8>

that the idea of what the world could be that Jesus brought to earth in his lifetime is *still* not a reality

I don't live in a world where the poor in spirit are blessed, or those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, or those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake

I live in a world where those who are blessed are generally the opposite of all of those things with labels like race, gender orientation and expression, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, and age all adding layers of disadvantage or, conversely, privilege

And, goodness, is it exhausting and devastating that this is still true

Renowned theologian, Karl Barth, said that when preachers preach we should do it with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other

True confession, when I write my sermons I keep one tab open with my sermon and another tab open with Facebook

Otherwise, I am rarely on Facebook, but when I write my sermons Facebook is my companion and I think of it like Barth's recommendation of the newspaper

I try to have my finger on the pulse of what people are talking about, what people care about – and yes, you can judge me that I choose Facebook in those moments, but it's alive for me

And as I opened the tab to write my sermon this week and as I scrolled through Facebook, I was so struck at my impatience that my sermons continue to feel like a calling to strive towards creating a world that is so different from the one we actually have to live in

I think usually my optimism can overcome my impatience and the dream of God's kingdom is enough for me to persevere

But, I am weighed down by the world right now.

I am still so sad about what happened in Lewiston not even two weeks ago.

I am so torn up about what is happening in Israel and Palestine.

I'm ready to vote, but I am so overwhelmed at some of the messaging for the state's referendum questions and the city where I live, Portland, has a significant mayoral race with important issues like housing and homelessness playing a central role in the conversations

My heart is heavy. My body is weary.

It's been 2,000 years and we still don't live in a world where Jesus' vision of blessedness and wholeness is reality

We don't

And, something my mother said to me this week made me realize that, yes, we don't live in a world where this is true, Jesus' Beatitudes are still countercultural – but, I do get glimpses of this blessedness

What did my mom say? “Are you celebrating All Saints' on Sunday? Will you please remember Glen?”

Glen Pierson Straker was my mom's first cousin

Glen was adopted as a baby by my mother's aunt and uncle.

Glen's parents were strict and (by family members' accounts) mean – for a child who likely dealt with significant learning disabilities and neurodivergence this made for a difficult childhood

I'm not sure that Glen had stable jobs throughout his life, he struggled with health issues, and was briefly incarcerated

His parents died rather young, and he loved them to their last days

In later years, Glen met a woman and got married, he gained a wife, a stepson, and a grandbaby, he was happy

At the urging of his eldest cousin, Glen discovered through one of the dna ancestry programs that he had a biological sister back in Massachusetts in the town where he knew he was born

Through conversation and encouragement, Glen met his sister and his other siblings, and just before she died, Glen got to meet his biological mother - who looked just like him

Glen died this year after some recent years of difficult health issues

Despite the deck of cards being stacked against him, Glen was one of the gentlest, kindest, most loving people you'd ever meet

One time he came to visit my grandparents and found out that it was almost my birthday, I think I was turning 10, and so he ran out to the store and bought me a present – a Space Jam purple basketball, I loved it

Glen loved football and when he was with us at Thanksgiving he always loved to point out that his hometown won the annual football game against my hometown, again (they always won!)

In his lifetime, Glen was poor in spirit, he experienced grief, he believed in doing the right thing even if he made mistakes in making it happen, he was merciful and pure in heart, he sought reconciliation in relationships, and he experienced significant judgment

Many people might look at Glen's life with our own sadness at his lack of access to more success: more successful relationships, successful health, successful jobs

And, certainly his life carried many burdens

But Glen was deeply faithful, and deeply grateful, and deeply content in many ways

Edwina Gateley, a spiritual writer, conference leader, and poet wrote in a reflection on All Saints' Day that: "Being a saint is all about being rooted in Christ and staying firm and faithful in the midst of all the violence."

That was Glen.

"Being a saint in our times," she goes on, "means being counter-cultural — seeing beyond and beneath the externals — knowing that, in spite of the fearful realities around us, the light of Christ is always present in the heart of our chaos."⁴

That was Glen.

With my heart so heavy with all that's happening in the world, Jesus' Beatitudes felt so far away from me this week

But, my mom reminded me that they were as near to me as my family – not in the most expected of vessels, but in a beautiful one nonetheless

And, this glimpse of blessedness cracked me open and let God's dream back into my heart.

I imagine that those glimpses surround you, too, if you allow yourself to perceive them or allow a saint to guide you to them.

John Bell, from the Iona Community in Scotland wrote these lyrics with which I conclude:

For all the saints who named your will
and showed the kingdom coming still
through selfless protest, prayer, and praise,
accept the gratitude we raise.

Bless all whose will or name or love
reflects the grace of heaven above.

⁴ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20141027JJ.shtml>

Though unacclaimed by earthly powers,
your life through theirs has hallowed ours.

Amen.