

Matthew 5:1-12

5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

5:2 And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5:5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

5:7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

5:8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

5:11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

5:12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

This morning, Jesus is not instructing us to mourn in order that we might receive blessing. Jesus is acknowledging that our mourning is a natural rhythm of life. When love transitions, in any form, grief follows. Pain follows. Big feelings follow. Today, on All Saints Sunday, we acknowledge the ache we feel in remembering the seasons that have passed and the saints who have shaped us. And we acknowledge a God who promises us comfort, peace, and blessing.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

The temperatures are dropping. The days are getting shorter. And the deepest, richest bits of green are slowly fading to browner hues. But if you step outside the back door of our church, you will find a maple tree with the most brilliant yellow and orange leaves in all of Raleigh. I think that tree has a distant cousin who lives at the entrance of my neighborhood. I say distant, because this cousin-tree has more of an orange streak or highlight through its tippy-top, sort of like if it went to the hairdresser and said, “Do something bold with my Burgundy, please!”

These brilliant tones stop me in my tracks. They warm my soul in unexplained ways. It is hard to describe, but I have this longing to see these old friends once a year, before they disappear like a

comet. Why must their brilliance be so fleeting, and why does fleeting beauty move us so deeply?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Am I drawn to this brilliance because in reality I am actually grieving the loss of another season? Yes, summer, this one in particular, the one in which my grass was greener than it has ever been (thanks, Joe Spruill for the second week in a row), and a restfulness that has once more given way to busyness. But other seasons, too. It is not lost on me that Halloween, and Thanksgiving, and Christmas, and Easter bring with them a sense of wonder for my children, that while still wonderfully childlike this year, will soon begin to lose some of that whimsy, and give way to different, more mature expressions.

Perhaps I am mourning our church's traditions. CROP Walk, Fall Festival, Fellowship Hall Meals, Missional Projects, etc. We still gather, and there is still joy and meaning, plenty of it, and yet their relevance now competes for attention in a post-Covid world.

Perhaps I am grieving sermons, and anthems, and prayers, and commentaries, and lighting candles, the rhythms of our faith expressions, seeking to carve out space in a landscape now crowded with AI and social media. Not to mention brunch and youth soccer. And things self-described as more spiritual than religious.

And I promise, just yesterday, it was 1986. At least I remember it like it was yesterday. And yet somehow, it was 40 years ago. And this is not some strange phenomenon unique to me. Apparently, everyone in my orbit, my church buddies, my family members, my neighbors are aging, too. Even LeBron James! There are lots of places where I

am coming to the realization that the people I expect to still be doing the things they have always done, myself included, cannot do those things anymore.

I am residing in this place where the brilliant fall colors remind me of that last full spark of life, but also of winter. To light that dims. To change. And loss. And a waiting on what is next.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

We are mourning seasons today, but saints as well, because they are the ones who fill our seasons. Too often, I believe we seek to paint our saints as people who were meeker, more humble, more righteous, more peacemaking, more merciful, more hardworking, more mournful and reverent, more *anything* than any of us could ever be. And it makes us wonder, “How could we ever CROP-Walk like Mary, or tell tales of Millbrook like Jack, or educate like Nancy, or love turkeys like Jim, or do any of the saintly things that would do justice to their presence in this place?” How can we keep being Millbrook in a Millbrook without the people who have defined it for us? How do we fill the void left behind? How will we proclaim a gospel of Millbrook for our time that can be as timely as the one they shared with us?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Do not despair, good friends. autumn, and this morning’s text, and the saints who have preceded us, all offer valuable wisdom and tangible hope.

The image of autumn is our aid. Not just in helping us to mourn what we have lost, but also in helping us trust in what will be. The saints whom we name aloud today were as brilliant and soul-warming as those orange leaves out back, and also just as human as you and me. They lived the same rhythms as us. They, too, knew the ache of change, and grief, and letting go. They knew what it is like to long for everything we can no longer hold. They laughed, and loved, and lived the same messiness we experience.

But most importantly, they faithed in the reality of God's promise. It is not distant. It is not fleeting. It is not evasive. And it is never ending. God's kin-dom is always in-breaking into our world. Yes, the leaves will wither and fade and return once more to dust. The season will end. Winter is the end of autumn, but it is not the end of Creation. It is not the end of God's good work.

The Beatitudes that we read today are not commandments or conditions. Rather, they are declarative statements that describe the life of faithful communities. This is not a checklist. We are not trying to earn scouting badges. Those who notice the world around them, who give meaning to the experiences of their neighbors, who work for a future full of God's possibilities, those who are faithful in changing seasons and through changing feelings, are blessed now in the present and will keep being blessed in the future. God's comfort, God's blessings, God's very presence are all made manifest in the places we least expect, especially the ones that make us feel removed from light and life.

How often we forget that the saints who preceded us never, not once, lived to be perfect in their application of the gospel. Like us, I promise you, they burned their fair share of potluck casseroles and

got tripped up when they were asked to read all the long names of those ancient peoples in the Pentecost passage. They were not spiritual superheroes. They simply sought to be consistent and faithful.

They lived, and labored, and loved in their own time, never with the expectation that the fruit of their pursuits would be fully ripened in their time. Rather, they believed the seeds they planted might grow for others to reap and harvest. The God stuff that infused them is infused in us as well. We do not inherit a work that will diminish, but rather we are called, promised even, to a work that replenishes and grows stronger and more vibrant.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Not might. Not could. Not should. But *will*.

Yes, it is true. Orange leaves give way to winter. But winter gives way to spring. Something new, but never separated from what is old. Something blooming, but always connected to the seeds they planted. Something rising, but always shaped by the saints who have modeled God's Spirit.

It is also not lost on me that when Mary meets Jesus on that very first Easter morning, she mistakes him for a gardener. Or at least a specific gardener, the one tending the cemetery. Because in truth, Jesus is a gardener. Resurrection begins in the least likely places, in dirt we assume is void of life. But Jesus calls us by name, in the darkest moment before dawn, in grief, even in death, and helps us experience new life in the present season and in all those to come. And I promise you, the saints speak to us in our labyrinth and sacred

garden out back, reminding us that life keeps growing in the soil of what we have lost.

And speaking of orange, those Monarch butterflies on Easter also happen to exude the most brilliant shade of orange. Yes, fleeting, but also profound, and also just as constant as the morning sun.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

It seems that brilliance is never an ending, but rather always a beginning. And it seems to me the very best way we can honor our saints is to embrace this current season of brilliance, not as some last gasp of brightness, but rather as the beginning of something even bigger and bolder. We need not become the saints of Millbrook; we need only tend the soil they have left us. Planting new seeds. Trusting and celebrating new seasons. Faithing the brilliance that God will continue to make out of ordinary lives like ours.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Thanks be to God.