

Sermon  
Matthew 5:1-12  
All Saints Sunday A; Sunday, Nov. 1, 2020  
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

Her due date was on a Tuesday. Becca is a pastor from New York who I met several years ago at the region's baby pastor school in Pennsylvania. She and her husband, Will, had been excitedly expecting their first child. She regularly posts on Facebook and kept her friends up-to-date on the details of her pregnancy. She posted pictures of her growing belly and other information about her child's formation in anticipation of his entrance into the world.

Just before Becca and Will left for their scheduled appointment two days later, she thought her water broke, so instead, they went to the hospital, thinking regular labor had started right on time. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Becca was hooked up to the monitoring machines and everything was going exactly as planned through the next hour or so of labor. Then, out of nowhere, the baby's heartbeat fell rapidly and the nurses spent a while trying to find it. It came back to the normal rate several times, but they wanted to be cautious, so they took Becca in for an emergency C-section. When they delivered baby Gideon, he wasn't breathing. They spent over 30 minutes trying to resuscitate him, but it was too late. Doctors had absolutely no idea what caused his death, but more tests were run to see if an answer could be found. Becca's doctor, who had delivered at least half the babies in town, had never seen anything like this in his career, because everything about the pregnancy and baby had been picture perfect, including testing literally seconds before Gideon's death.

Like many of you, Will and Becca know all too well the feeling of hopes and dreams that have been shattered. Some of you have lost children or grandchildren of your own, parents, siblings, friends. But today, I want to recognize that all types of loss deserve our notice. Many forms of loss, in addition to death, require comfort. And that loss can come in many ways.

Loss can come in the form of leaving, as we depart for a new job and new home, while leaving beloved friends and colleagues behind.

It comes as you slowly lose a loved one to Alzheimer's.

It comes in the loss of employment and the loss of dignity that always seems to follow. It comes from struggles with illness both of body and mind.

Loss comes from the exhaustion of caring for a special needs child and the occasional recognition of all the things given up in order to offer that care.

It comes from disappointment at home or work or school, of dreams deferred or hopes dashed. Such loss comes at us from so many sources, and I wonder how, in this day of remembering the saints, we could also remember these things as well.

Our reading from the book of Revelation, was written as a word of encouragement, hope, and comfort to Christians who were struggling with enormous loss of identity and the threat of losing their independence and even their lives. Might we imagine that the "saints" are not only those who are robed in white or gathered into the church triumphant but also each of us, as we too have come, or perhaps are still coming,

through ordeals great and small? To those who are struggling to find hope or healing, and to grasp Christ's promise to "wipe away every tear."

Promises are amazing in that they don't just *describe* things, promises have the capacity actually to *create* the reality they name. When I served my congregation in Vermont, each Sunday I would promise Carole that I'd be down to her house in Connecticut by 3 and when I got there, the table was set and a sumptuous dinner was waiting to be eaten. Promises come as a word beyond us, which then sets things in motion. And that is why I think promises are incredible important.

When we're struck in grief or loss, like Will and Becca were that day not too long ago, I am sure it has been hard for them to imagine, let alone move toward, a future not dominated by past difficulties – or for them, the death of their first child.

And so it is with each of us. Christ's words of promise create hope that enables us to take our first steps toward a future not defined by our past.

In the same way, I think Jesus' words from his Sermon on the Mount aren't just a record of what he said long ago, instead, we can listen to them as words spoken to us now. Notice that Jesus not only blesses all kinds of people, but especially the kinds of people who aren't normally blessed – the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, and so on. The world typically gives these people little regard, just as not many notice our silent losses and grief, and yet Jesus calls these people blessed.

He doesn't say, "one day you *will* be blessed," but "blessed *are...*," even now, even here. Why? Because blessing isn't like the flu shot. Blessing doesn't immunization you from pain or loss, and it's not a guarantee of safe passage through this life unscathed. Rather, it's a sense of fullness, of contentment, of joy that is like, but also transcends, ordinary happiness. And like love and hope and so many other things, it can't simply be rallied into existence but instead, this blessing is responsive, springing forth in response to the love and promises of someone else.

God sees you, God knows the grief that weighs down your hearts, the depression or addiction that oppresses you, the challenges you are facing and the uphill struggles you are anticipating. God sees you, honors you, *blesses* you, and accompanies you.

Also blessed are the creators of an updated Beatitudes for today

– these from Intern Claire's Ackleow's FB page:

- Blessed are the working poor, for they will know God's rest in the wealth of grace.
- Blessed are the uninsured/ underinsured and people with pre-existing conditions, whose healthcare is neither healthy or caring, for God's healing hand is hallowed for such as these.
- Blessed are those who have ever been shamed or rejected by the church, for they will be cherished and protected in the Kin-dom of God
- Blessed are those marginalized and on society's fringe, for they make up the tassels on God's prayer shawl and in them, God takes great pride!
- Blessed are the compassionate, for they shall receive the compassion of Jesus.
- Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others and forgive them from their heart.

And these from Pope Francis a few days ago:

- Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized and show them their closeness.
- Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others also discover him.
- Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home.
- Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.
- Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians."
- All these are messengers of God's mercy and tenderness," Pope Francis said.  
"Surely they will receive from him their merited reward."

I need to remind you that even when you struggle you are not being faithless.

This is a concern I've heard countless times - that when you struggle or doubt or fear you are letting God down. But that's just not true.

Martin Luther, in the middle of his reforms, once took up the matter of the "marks of the church" – preaching, sacraments, and all that. He left it pretty much unchanged, but added one "mark" – *struggle*. He figured that where there is faith there is also always struggle. And that helps me remember that struggle, doubt, feeling overwhelmed, wondering if God is out there – these aren't signs of failure or lack of faith, but are actually a testament to profound faith as we wrestle with such deep questions and thereby take God seriously.

If this weren't true, we wouldn't have so many Psalms of lament in the Bible!

And so, when you feel at your most low, and wonder if you have lost our faith, God names you among the most faithful.

*Blessed are those who struggle.*

And blessed are those who mourn.

Jesus will indeed wipe every tear from our eyes one day, and that Jesus sees our struggles and knows our grief.

Remember, God knows something about loss.

God came down to earth as Jesus to live among us as one of us, to experience what it was like to be human.

Jesus experienced the attachments and the emotions each of us feel.

He felt rage when those in power desecrated the temple.

He wept when he was told that his friend Lazarus had died.

And as he was dying, Jesus forgave his torturers and asked a friend to care for his mother.

God suffers again and again with each of us as we mourn the loss of our loved ones. And God suffers alongside of us, comforting us in our sorrow, feeling our pain.

God also mourns each and every one of his precious children when they die, whether the dying are our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, our own parents, our brothers and sisters, our friends, and our children – even those children who, like Gideon, died before they ever got to meet their parents.

Amen