

**ALL SAINTS MESSAGE**  
**MATTHEW 5:1-12 AND REVELATION 7:9-17**  
**NOVEMBER 3, 2019**

**“WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?”**

The Sermon on the mount, which Matthew really describes as more of a chat, being as he tells us Jesus was sitting down the whole time, has come to be defined by its oft repeated phrase “blessed are”, which has also been translated as “happy are.” The late TV preacher Robert Schuller wrote a book on Matthew 5:1-12 he called “*The Be Happy Attitudes*”. The problem with the word “happy” though is that it’s rooted in an old English word “hap” which means luck or chance – as in “happenstance”. Jesus does not speak of things that occur by chance – and most folks wouldn’t associate grief or persecution with being lucky.

The problem with calling these the “*be happy attitudes*” is the unavoidable association we make with positive thinking or personal effort. Some see here a code of ethics for Christians, but our Lord surely is not indifferent to the mourning of non-Christians or any less pleased with the peacemaking efforts of unbelievers. This is not good advice. It is gospel – good news. People who are already experiencing these things are, paradoxically, in good shape, because these are the kinds of people Jesus blesses. These are promises to be fulfilled in God’s time.

In Revelation 7, a vision of that fulfillment is presented. In verse 13, an elder of heaven asks John “*who are these people – robed in white, and where did they come from?*” You’d think the elder should know – since he’s presumably one of them. John claims he doesn’t – or simply doesn’t want to speculate on who the inheritors of blessing will be. But John should have known – his Lord had told him plainly what sorts of people God blesses.

Revelation uses for them the lofty phrase – “*those who have come through the tribulation*” and so we associate it with catastrophic events or persecution. A reading of Matthew 5 suggests a more modest, “earthly” definition. “These people” have simply come through life – its calamities and seductions mingled with simple pleasures and shining moments. Jesus says “these people” are defined by what they lack or by what they have in abundance.

The first group includes folks who miss the ones they love, or the vigor of youth, or the splendid, chaotic days of raising the kids, or live with the sorrow of never having had that opportunity. They mourn. Or they’ve lived an “under the radar “normal life” with few of the trophies life hands out. They are the humble – Jesus calls them “the poor in spirit.” Others of this group are they who see in themselves the struggle against sin we wage every day and wish they’d have more faith, or more strength to lead a holy life. They “hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

---

The second group on the other hand is defined by their abundance. The “merciful” – people who don’t just identify but also suffer with someone and pours some part of themselves out for them. The “pure in heart” - who always find the bright side of things, they encourage, and who, for some of us I’m afraid – are dismissed as naïve. Peacemakers – folks who try to settle an argument, not a score. Finally folks for whom a confession of faith earns them an a generous helping of the world’s disdain. They too are the sorts of people Jesus blesses.

We all know these words of Jesus – they are some of his most famous. We don't doubt that they ought to be true – we want them to be true, they speak of the possibility of a better “us.” But we may doubt that they work or if they can brighten a dark day. Maya Angelou wrote an autobiography she titled, “*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*” In it she describes the effect of a revival service on a gathering of black worshipers. The preacher extolled the virtues of charity, called on believers to forgive their enemies, and encouraged them to bear up under this life of toil and care, because a blessed home awaited them. The congregation was consoled.

*"They basked,"* Ms. Angelou wrote, *"in the righteousness of the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and who hungered for justice and righteousness."* They believed what the preacher and the Bible said. The ugliness of their present lives would finally be overcome by the power of God. The people in the revival tent heard Jesus say *"You are blessed."*

But minutes later they experienced something else. Shortly after they left the tent, the worshipers were greeted by the sounds of honky-tonk music and stamping feet. Saturday night customers swelled Miss Grace's Barrelhouse. The night was filled with lights and noise and who knows what sorts of things being negotiated under the cover of it all. As the worshipers passed Miss Grace's Barrelhouse, where folks were thirsting for anything but righteousness, their consolation ebbed. Regardless of the words of the preacher and the teachings of Jesus, these believers by creed and circumstance were society's outcasts. The blessings they were just taught were drowned by sounds of a happiness far removed and they merged with the cry, *"How long, merciful Father?"*

The collision between what is and the promise of what is to come is in full view of our lesson from Matthew. Those worshippers Maya Angelou described may have been too poor to indulge themselves at Miss Grace's or simply the wrong color to be granted admittance, yet blessing was theirs simply because the esteem in which God held them. They were the kind of people Jesus blesses. It was neither because of what they lacked in life or had more than their fair share of, it was because of the future God has for them.

Who are these robed in white? They include the one you laid to rest this past year, or oh my, has it been five years already - whose picture on your wall still invites a conversation. They are little ones like Eleanor Koster and Madeline Voss, baptized into a promise without the slightest idea who that promise maker is yet. That is why they need us to tell them. They are worshippers who get on their knees, even if now days it hurts going down and coming up a lot more than it used to, because the forgiveness a confession of sin begets is worth every aching muscle. Who are these people? They ones only a Savior like Jesus could love. Like you. AMEN